STORIES OF WESTERN AVENGERS IN ACTION

RANGE RIDERS

15¢

FEB.

THE WYOMING WADDY
A Story of Colt Magic
By JACKSON COLE

IN THIS ISSUE:

GUN TRAIL TO GLORY

A LONG BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL FEATURING THE WEST'S MOST FEARLESS TRIO OF CATTLE COUNTRY AVENGERS
By OSCAR J. FRIEND

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

AWHIZZ

BOYS, EARN THIS SPEEDY SILVER KING BICYCLE

Comes to you with

BLAST HORNLITE
SHOCK ABSORBERS
PLATFORM CARRIER
COASTER BRAKE
BALLOON TIRES
DOUBLE-BAR FRAME
STEERING-GEAR LOCK

300 OTHER PRIZES

Mail Coupon to Get Prize Book

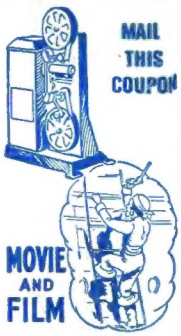
OH, BOY! Here's the bicycle for *you*. Beautiful aluminum alloy frame, fully streamlined, glistens like polished silver. Built low for speed and safety. Foolproof lock built in steering head. Cushioned balloon tires, giving a smooth "air-flo" ride. A bike that will make your chums sit up and take notice. Wow, what a thrill you'll get when you flash down the street.

300 Prizes

Earn this wonderful bike for your own. Or, take any of 300 other big prizes, including typewriter, movie machine, athletic equipment, gold watches. Make MONEY, besides. It's easy. In your spare time just deliver our popular magazines to customers whom you obtain in your neighborhood. Some boys earn a prize such as a model airplane or compo-pearl knife the first day. Mail the coupon now to get started. State your age.

I WISH I HAD SOME SPENDING MONEY
HERE'S MY CHANCE! I'LL MAIL THE COUPON!
BRING A MAGAZINE EVERY MONTH
NOW I HAVE MONEY AND A BICYCLE, BESIDES!

MAIL THIS COUPON



Mr. Jim Thayer, Dept. 853
The Crowell Publishing Co., Springfield, Ohio

Dear Jim: Send me a Prize Book and start me making MONEY and earning PRIZES.

Name..... Age.....

Address .....

City..... State.....

MEN–Apply at Once!

If You Want a Remarkable Chance to

MAKE UP TO $45.00 IN A WEEK

Running Your Own Local Coffee Agency

Over 300 more men will be given the opportunity *at once* to run fine-paying Coffee Agencies right in their own home localities. A remarkable chance to make up to $45.00 in a week starting immediately. No experience needed. This company will send you everything you need, give you all the help you require, and back you up with its proven successful plans. A chance to be independent, work as you please, and make more than just a modest living.

Limited Number of New Openings

If you want to know whether there is an opening for you in your own or nearby locality, mail the Application below. By return mail you will be notified whether we have an opening for you, and if we have, you will receive full information about this Coffee Agency Plan. You don't send a penny—just mail the Application. No obligation—you decide after you read the plan. Don't delay. Send your Application at once.

Operate Right From Your Own Home

Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, and many other daily household necessities. They *must* buy these things. All you need do is visit your regular customers in your locality, supply their needs and pocket your fine profits. M. C. Ebert, Pa., reported $68.20 clear profit in a week; G. J. Olsen, N. Y., $79.85 in a week; W. J. Way, Kansas, with us 9 years, $19.10 in one day; Mrs. H. H. Hosick, Nebr., $41.73 her very first week; Mrs. Ella Ehrlicher, Mo., with us over 6 years, $85 in one week. J. W. Willoughy, Okla., $48 his first week. These exceptional earnings show *your* possibilities. Brand new Ford Tudor Sedans, or $500.00 cash if preferred, are given producers as a bonus in addition to their own cash earnings.

Find Out If Your Locality Is Open

SEND NO MONEY

Just clip out and mail the Application. It merely tells us that you would consider running a permanent, highly profitable Coffee Agency in your locality if we have an opening for you. We will write to let you know if we have an opening, and will give you complete details about this exceptionally fine opportunity. Then you can decide for yourself whether the money-making possibilities look good to you. Don't delay—rush the Application at once.

ALBERT MILLS, President
9241 Monmouth Avenue Cincinnati, Ohio

COFFEE AGENCY APPLICATION

WRITE YOUR FULL NAME AND ADDRESS HERE:

(1) Name.....
(State whether Mr., Mrs., or Miss)

Address.....

City and State.....

(2) **HOW MUCH TIME CAN YOU DEVOTE TO COFFEE AGENCY?**
Mark with an "X" ☐ FULL TIME ☐ PART TIME

Full time pays up to $30 to 45 in a week. Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to $22.50 in a week.

(3) **STATE WHICH BONUS YOU PREFER—CASH OR FORD AUTOMOBILE**
In addition to their cash earnings, we offer producers a cash bonus of $500.00 or brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan. State which you prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

☐ $500 CASH BONUS ☐ LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN

CAN YOU START AT ONCE? Mark with an "X" ☐ YES ☐ NO

(4) If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.....

.....

RUSH! Tear Out and Mail at Once to
ALBERT MILLS, President, 9241 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.

● EVERY STORY BRAND-NEW ●

RANGE RIDERS

Vol. 3, No. 3 CONTENTS February, 1939

The West's Most Fearless Avengers

in

A Full Book-Length Novel

GUN TRAIL TO GLORY

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

(Profusely Illustrated)

Sheepmen and Cattlemen Lock Horns as Six-gun Thunder Rends the Western Skies! Judge Colt Presides in the Raw, Riotous Montana Hills Until the Cattle Country Avengers Arrive Hell-Bent for Action to Clean Up a Range Feud and Establish Peace and Justice! - - - - - - - - - 15

Action Short Stories

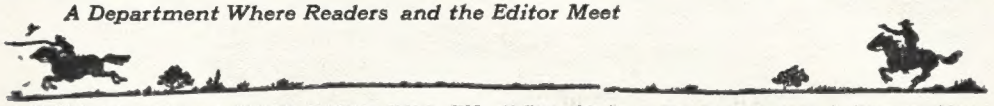
WYOMING WADDY - - - - - - - - - Jackson Cole 114
When a Dead Man Calls, Dan Parker is Hell-bent for a Showdown

HANGING EVIDENCE - - - - - - - - Galen C. Colin 118
A Hard-hitting Ranny Delivers Payment for a Brutal Bushwhacking

AND

RIDERS OF THE WESTERN TRAILS - - - True Picture-Story 112
Tom Horn Routs the Rustlers of Coon Hole!

TRAIL CAMP - - - - - - - - - - - - - - The Editor 128
A Department Where Readers and the Editor Meet



Published bi-monthly by BETTER PUBLICATIONS, INC., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Copyright, 1938, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, $.90; single copies, $.15. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter at the post office at New York, N. Y., on August 23, 1938, under act of March 3, 1879. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

Read our companion magazines: Popular Western, Thrilling Mystery, Thrilling Western, Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Love, The Phantom Detective, The Lone Eagle, Sky Fighters, Popular Detective, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Detective Novels Magazine, Thrilling Wonder Stories, G-Men, Popular Sports Magazine, Black Book Detective Magazine, West, Masked Rider Western Magazine, Thrilling Sports, Everyday Astrology, Startling Stories, and Strange Stories.

TRAPPED IN THE PATH OF BLIND DEATH!

JALMER KRAPU

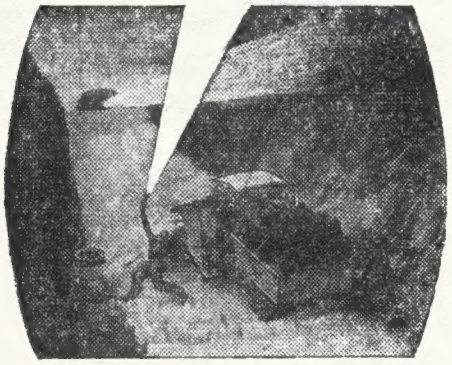
North Dakota Farmer Faces Doom, Pinned Beneath Disabled Truck

1 "I was coming home from town one night with a load of coal on my farm truck," writes Jalmer Krapu, of La Moure, N. D., "when, a few feet from the top of a steep hill, a front wheel came off.

2 "In the tool box, I found an old flashlight I hadn't used for months and was surprised to find it gave a strong light. I got out the jack and some other tools, then carefully put out the light to save the juice till I needed it more, and laid the flashlight on the road. My headlights ran on the magneto and so had gone out when I stopped.

3 "I had the jack almost to its full height when it slipped, the axle crashed down to the road again, pinning my arm beneath it. As I lay there helpless in the dark with my head against the road, I heard a car coming.

"In a few seconds he would be over the crest of the hill and roaring down on me. I *had* to warn him before he reached the hill top... or it would be too late! I was square in the middle of the road, *and death was on its way* ... certainly for me, perhaps for others, too.



4 "I thought of the flashlight lying there on the road... but I couldn't reach it! I stretched out toward it as far as I could, managed to touch it with the toe of one foot. I thought my arm under that axle would break as I strained for the light and finally kicked it to where I could reach it with my left hand, snap on the light and wave it above the crest of the hill to warn the approaching driver.

5 "Those *fresh* DATED 'Eveready' batteries rescued me from as desperate a trap as a man could be caught in. Thanks only to them I got off with only a lame arm when my number seemed to be up.

(Signed) Jalmer Krapu"

FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... *Look for the* DATE-LINE

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC., 30 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide UCC *and Carbon Corporation*

Think of It!

Our Graduates Run 47% of ALL the Identification Bureaus of America!

Send for complete list of over 600 Bureaus where our graduates have been placed in good positions as

FINGERPRINT EXPERTS

Then write the nearest Bureau and learn what our graduates think of us!

We have space here to list only a FEW of these more than 600 institutions, so be sure to send for the *complete* list!

State of Idaho	Trenton, N. J.
State of Colorado	Detroit, Mich.
State of Iowa	El Paso, Tex.
State of Utah	Schenectady, N. Y.
State of Ohio	Scranton, Pa.
Boston, Mass.	Lincoln, Neb.
New York, N. Y.	Mobile, Ala.
Pittsburgh, Pa.	Little Rock, Ark.
St. Paul, Minn.	Pontiac, Mich.
Mexico City, Mex.	Havana, Cuba
Augusta, Ga.	Miami, Fla.
Seattle, Wash.	Birmingham, Ala.
Omaha, Neb.	Columbus, Ohio
Des Moines, Ia.	Galveston, Tex.
Montreal, Can.	Houston, Tex.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa	Windsor, Ont.
Elgin, Ill.	Pueblo, Colo.
Syracuse, N. Y.	Salt Lake City, Utah
Tampa, Fla.	Atlantic City, N. J.
Long Beach, Cal.	Sioux City, Iowa
St. Louis, Mo.	Rochester, N. Y.
State of Michigan	Lansing, Mich.	Cleveland, Ohio
State of Washington	Burlington, Ia.	Spokane, Wash.
State of Massachusetts	Erie, Pa.	Fort Worth, Tex.
State of Illinois	Oklahoma City, Okla.	Shreveport, La.

Want a Regular Monthly Salary?

Be a Secret Service and Identification Expert!

Enjoy the thrill of getting your man—with no personal danger—PLUS a regular monthly paid salary and the opportunity to share in Rewards. Learn at home, in spare time, and at low cost, the unique secrets of this young, fascinating and fast growing profession. You have exactly the same opportunity that was offered the hundreds of our graduates who now hold splendid positions in more than 600 institutions. Each of these bureaus has anywhere from ONE to FIFTEEN of our graduates on regular salaries—and new openings develop from time to time.

Wonderful Opportunity for TRAINED MEN in This Young, Fast Growing Profession

Of the thousands of towns in America, three-fourths are still without identification bureaus. Many more are bound to come! That spells OPPORTUNITY. But you must be READY! It's easy to master this profession that combines thrills with personal safety, AND the security of a steady income. We show you HOW—just as we have already shown the hundreds who now hold good pay positions.

FREE! **The Confidential Reports Operator No. 38 Made to His Chief**

Just rush coupon! Follow this Operator's exciting hunt for a murderous gang. Also, get free, "The Blue Book of Crime," showing the wonderful opportunities in the field of Finger Prints and Crime Detection. Take your first step TODAY toward a steady income and success. Mail coupon NOW!

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Avenue Dept. 7962 Chicago

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7962, Chicago

Gentlemen: With no obligation on my part, send me Confidential Reports of Operator No. 38, also illustrated "Blue Book of Crime," complete list of bureaus employing your graduates, together with your low prices and Easy Terms offer. (Literature will be sent ONLY to persons stating their age.)

Name .....

Address..... Age.....

ANNOUNCING!

THE MAGAZINE OF THE FUTURE

STARTLING STORIES

Featuring a Complete Book-Length Novel by

STANLEY G. WEINBAUM

—in its first issue

Now On Sale At All Stands

15c PER COPY

Gripping Tales of the Uncanny

By Masters of the Weird and Supernatural

In Our NEW Companion Magazine

Strange STORIES

JUST OUT!

15c AT ALL STANDS

I WILL SEND MY FIRST LESSON FREE

It Shows How I Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for a

GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. Smith, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I will prove I can train you at home in your spare time to be a RADIO EXPERT. I will send you my first lesson FREE. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand—how practical I make learning Radio at home. Men without Radio or electrical knowledge become Radio Experts, earn more money than ever as a result of my Training.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to $6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Why Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Radio is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over $50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. And RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred $30, $50, $75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future!

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to our regular Course, I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning.

How You Get Practical Experience While Learning

I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loud-speaker installations. This 50-50 method of training—with printed instructions and working with Radio parts and circuits—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you with a professional instrument for full time jobs after graduation.

Money Back Agreement Protects You

I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for sample lesson and 64-page book. They're free to any fellow over 16 years old. They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my training in Radio and Television; show you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 9B09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Here's Proof

Service Manager for Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M——— Furniture Co., for their four stores."—JAMES E. RYAN, 1535 Slade St., Fall River, Mass.

$40 a Month in Spare Time

"I have a very good spare time trade. At times it is more than I can handle. I make on an average of $40 per month profit, and that is spare time, working week ends and some evenings." — IRA BIVANS, 218½ E. 3rd St., Bock Falls, Ill.

Earnings Tripled by N. R. I. Training

"I have been doing nicely, thanks to N. R. I. Training. My present earnings are about three times what they were before I took the Course. I consider N. R. I. Training the finest in the world."—BERNARD COSTA, 201 Kent St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

The Tested WAY to BETTER PAY

MAIL COUPON NOW!

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON **FREE**

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9B09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send the sample lesson and your book which tells about the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

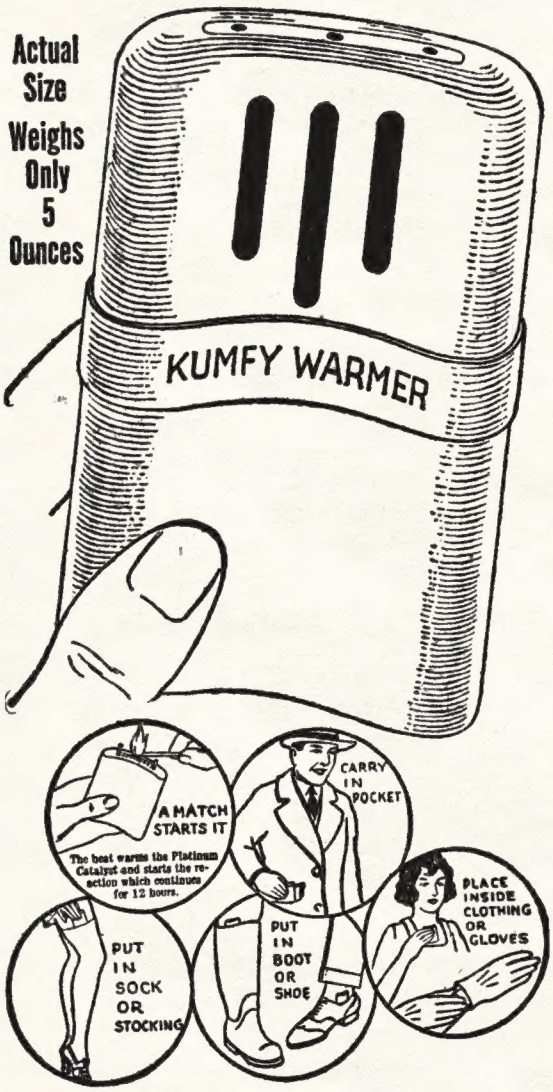
NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....2FR

MYSTERY INVENTION

Actual Size
Weighs Only 5 Ounces



A MATCH STARTS IT
The heat warms the Platinum Catalyst and starts the reaction which continues for 12 hours.
CARRY IN POCKET
PLACE INSIDE CLOTHING OR GLOVES
PUT IN BOOT OR SHOE
PUT IN SOCK OR STOCKING

Unlimited Market—Everybody Buys

Kumfy Warmer sells to EVERYONE instead of just a limited market. Mailmen covering their routes—policemen walking their beats or directing traffic—school children trudging from home to school and back again—truck drivers and delivery men—shoppers—newspaper boys, and telegraph messengers—milkmen handling cold bottles of milk—doctors and salesmen making calls on patients or customers—housewives starting their duties before the home is warm, or working in unheated rooms—office and factory workers waiting for street cars or buses—auto mechanics on cold garage floors—farmers doing their chores—passengers in busses, street cars or autos—in fact almost everybody NEEDS the Kumfy. You can be the one to supply the demand in your territory with a big profit—up to 205 percent on every Kumfy sold there. Fill out and mail the coupon RIGHT NOW.

KUMFY WARMER
Dept. S-2309 Cincinnati, Ohio

Keeps Hands, Feet, Ears, Body

WARM

Pays YOU Up To 205% Profit!

What's this? KUMFY WARMER! An amazing, breath-taking mystery invention with a market running into the millions. The invention that brings portable heat, in convenient form and at low cost, to everyone—that makes it unnecessary to be cold or uncomfortable in cool weather. It's new—it's sensational—and in a short time it will be in as universal use as stoves and furnaces. With a Kumfy on your person you keep cozily warm even on the coldest below-zero days. Carry in hand or pocket—slip in glove, sock, stocking, shoe or boot, or hang inside clothing. Kumfy's gentle, constant, absolutely SAFE heat warms your blood and keeps you comfortable all over — helps protect health against chills, colds and pneumonia. Just like carrying a comforting stove with you—yet Kumfy is popular priced, weighs only about 5 ounces, and is small enough to put in a vest pocket.

ABSOLUTELY SAFE—NO FLAME
Just Comfortable Warmth for 12 Hours

The Kumfy Warmer works like a charm! It fascinates everybody! Dramatic demonstration SELLS IT ON SIGHT! This sensational invention is made possible by that amazing mystery of science, the Platinum Catalyst, which creates heat WITHOUT A FLAME. Takes only 10 seconds to warm up — STAYS WARM MANY HOURS at a time. The Platinum Catalyst is not consumed—it lasts for YEARS of constant service. Kumfy Warmer has no moving parts—nothing to get out of order—nothing to wear out—nothing to fix.

Get The Big Profit News NOW

THIS IS A WINNER! If you're prepared to tackle the job of taking orders for hundreds and thousands of Kumfy Warmers, rush Coupon below for complete details, FREE SAMPLE OFFER, and big-profit news. Inquiries invited from ambitious men and women who are not afraid of big money—who can handle exclusive territories on a big scale. Whatever you do, don't lose time. This is a "natural." Rush Coupon and learn how you can get YOUR SHARE of the big profits. Act NOW!

RUSH COUPON FOR FREE DETAILS

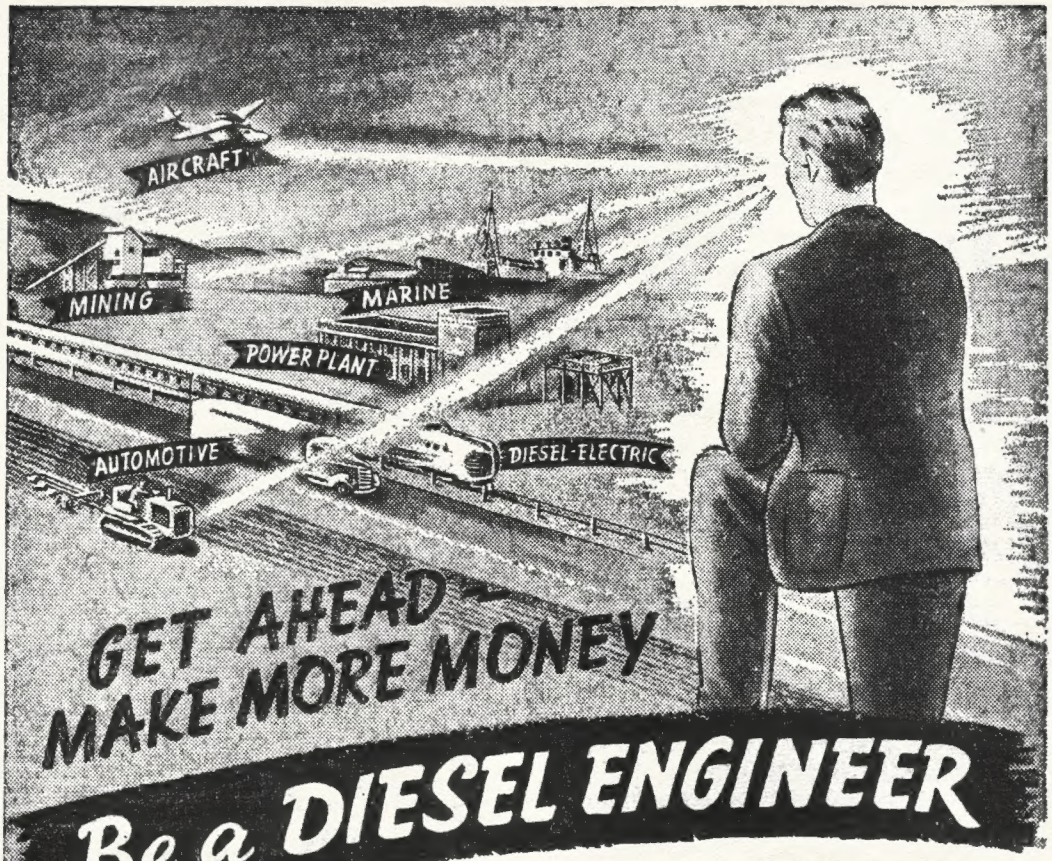
Dept. S-2309, Cincinnati, Ohio.
KUMFY WARMER,

Please rush me FREE SAMPLE OFFER, complete details about the Kumfy Warmers, and explain how I can make Big Profits as your representative.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....



GET AHEAD — MAKE MORE MONEY

Be a DIESEL ENGINEER

TOOK TRAINING
Now Chief Engineer

"...Since leaving your school I have been constantly employed in the Diesel field, advancing from my first job as ordinary operator, several steps ahead to my present job as Chief Engineer of the New Mexico Gold Producers Corp."
(signed) R. E. Lee

Already booming, Diesel is repeating the spectacular growth of the automobile industry right over again -- thousands of "top" men are there because they "got in on the ground floor" . . . when that industry was new and growing by leaps and bounds. Now it is the Diesel industry that offers YOU exactly the same kind of an opportunity.

WHAT ARE *YOU* GOING TO DO ABOUT *YOUR* DIESEL CAREER?

Get full information on a training plan designed to fit you to get ahead and make money as a Diesel engineer . . . training you can get -- no matter where you live. Send the coupon NOW.

HEMPHILL DIESEL SCHOOLS

America's original exclusively Diesel training institution . . . fully equipped to thoroughly train you as a Diesel Engineer.

BOSTON, 124 Brookline Ave.; NEW YORK, 31-31 Queens Blvd., L. I. C.; DETROIT, 2348 W. Lafayette Blvd.; CHICAGO, 2030 Larrabee St.; MEMPHIS, 449 Monroe Ave.; LOS ANGELES, 2010 San Fernando Rd.; SEATTLE, 506 Westlake North,; VANCOUVER, 1367 Granville St.

Located only in the above named cities and not connected with any other Diesel schools.

Please send me free new issue of "March of Diesel" booklet and information on Hemphill Diesel training. (This information intended only for men between 18 and 45).

NAME_____ AGE____

STREET_____

CITY_____ STATE_____ m-33-t

Send This Coupon to Nearest Address Shown At Left

MIND POWER

A FREE BOOK

Develop your personal, creative power! Awaken the silent, sleeping forces in your own consciousness. Become Master of your own life. Push aside all obstacles with a new energy you have overlooked. The Rosicrucians know how, and will help you apply the greatest of all powers in man's control. Create health and abundance for yourself. Write for *Free* book, "The Secret Heritage." It tells how you may receive these teachings for study and use. It means the dawn of a new day for you. Address: Scribe Y.T.T.

The Rosicrucians

SAN JOSE —AMORC— CALIFORNIA

"The Rosicrucians are NOT a religious organization"

SONG POEMS

WANTED AT ONCE! Mother, Home, Love, Patriotic, Sacred, Comic or any subject. Don't delay — send us your original poem today for immediate consideration.

RICHARD BROS., 74 Woods Bldg., CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

She Got $400.00 for a Half Dollar

I will pay CASH for OLD COINS, BILLS and STAMPS

POST YOURSELF! It pays! I paid $400.00 to Mrs. Dowty of Texas, for one Half Dollar; J. D. Martin of Virginia $200.00 for a single Copper Cent. Mr. Manning of New York, $2,500.00 for one Silver Dollar. Mrs. G. F. Adams, Ohio, received $740.00 for a few old coins. I will pay big prices for all kinds of old coins, medals, bills and stamps.

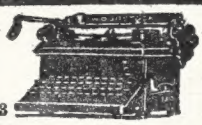
I WILL PAY $100.00 FOR A DIME!

1894 S. Mint; $50.00 for 1913 Liberty Head Nickel (not Buffalo) and hundreds of other amazing prices for coins. Send 4c for Large Illustrated Coin Folder and further particulars. It may mean much profit to you. Write today to

B. MAX MEHL, 133 Mehl Bldg., FORT WORTH, TEXAS

(Largest Rare Coin Establishment in U. S.)

See REBUILT BY WOODSTOCK BUILDER



Winner... Most World's School Contests—

EASY TERMS—FREE TRIAL

WRITE FOR LITERATURE DEPT. B-28

WOODSTOCK TYPEWRITER CO., WOODSTOCK, ILL.

High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares you for entrance to college. Standard H. S. texts supplied — Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-258, Drexel, at 58th, Chicago

CANDID CAMERA CATCHES CO-EDS

In Every Issue Of

COLLEGE HUMOR

•

GAYER AND GRANDER THAN EVER

•

15c

AT ALL STANDS

CATTLE DIE IN DROVES

Mysterious Malady of the Range Creates War!

Mile after mile of barb wire barricade stretches across the Oklahoma plains—as desperate men oppose the passage of the herds on the cattle trails! For cattle are dying from fever from an unknown cause—and only the West's most famous trio of avengers can solve the mystery!

Follow Doc Reese, Dusty Trail, and Hank Ball on this powdersmoke path to justice! Thrill to their exploits and daring!

The entire story's told in the next issue of RANGE RIDERS—in WINCHESTER WAR, a complete book-length novel by Oscar J. Friend. Watch for it!

Plan Your Future

Choose Your Field NOW For Success

Will you master fate or will fate master you? That's a question deserving your honest answer...right now! Actually it is largely up to you. You can do with Life almost what you will. LaSalle will help you establish yourself for real success by providing you with the comprehensive, specialized training for which it is so famous. Choose your field . . . now! Check the coupon below for the free booklet you want us to send you. It can be your first step toward assured success.

Opportunities in Traffic Management

The field of Traffic Management offers real opportunity only to the man who knows. Spare time study and the will to succeed have pushed scores of Traffic employees up the ladder to financial success. Many LaSalle-trained traffic managers—in the railroad, truck and industrial field—now command salaries of $3,000.00 to $5,000.00 a year—and better. Investigate. Find out how you can qualify for these higher positions through LaSalle home-study and guidance.

Law for Business Success

And it isn't necessary to practice law to get this Success. In fact probably most of the men who study law today have no idea of taking the bar examination or becoming lawyers—they want law training to help them master men and situations in business. You know that—

(1) the man with legal training is a leader—not a follower.

(2) legal training keens your mind—clears away the problems that stump the ordinary fellow and makes you master instead of man.

(3) knowledge of law simplifies the complications of executive work.

(4) Many top executive places are filled by men who have studied law.

No matter whether you are in a big corporation or a small business—in a city or a little town—a practical knowledge of law can hardly fail to be of real and vital help to you in making a more successful career.

In every state in the union you'll find law-trained men who came up through LaSalle. What others have done, you can do.

And LaSalle offers either a full law course leading to LL. B. or a shorter business law training—whichever you prefer. All text material, including valuable 14-volume Law Library. Training comprises the most effective features of modern law instruction.

Executive Training

Executives who are efficient managers command responsible positions and good incomes. And the need for trained executives is growing rapidly. We train you thoroughly at home in your spare time for every type of executive work—teach you the principles and practices used by our most successful business leaders and help you develop your management capacity—by a training built with the aid of outstanding executives.

Become an Expert Accountant

The Profession That Pays

The demand for skilled accountants—men who really know their business—is increasing rapidly. New state and federal legislation requires much more, and more efficient accounting from business—big and small. Corporations are in constant need of expert counsel in matters relating to Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Organization, Management, Finance. Men who prove their qualifications in this important branch of business are rapidly promoted to responsible executive positions—given an opportunity to earn real salaries. The range is from $2,000.00 to $10,000.00 a year—even to higher income figures.

Under the LaSalle Problem Method you can at home acquire a thoro understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of these principles—this without losing an hour of work or a dollar of pay.

Your training will be under the direct supervision of a staff of legal, organization and management specialists, business efficiency engineers and Certified Public Accountants.

Preliminary knowledge of bookkeeping is unnecessary. We train you from the ground up, or from where you now are, according to your individual needs.

Mr. Salesman: What's Wrong?

Why aren't you making more sales—more money? Is it you—or your proposition? Check up first on yourself. Other men—no better than you—have found their earnings jump and stay up when they trained with LaSalle. Literally thousands of men—many of them years at the game—have increased their sales volume and earnings through home study with LaSalle guidance. Sound—practical—usable—right from field experience. Train for top-notch production with LaSalle.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION Dept. 2329-R, Chicago

I would like to have your special booklet—without any cost or obligation to me—about my opportunities and your success training in the business field I have checked.

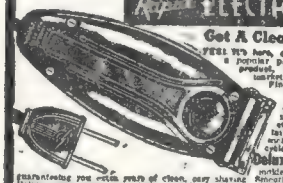
- ☐ Higher Accountancy
- ☐ Law: Degree of LL.B.
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Modern Salesmanship
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Commercial Law
- ☐ Expert Bookkeeping
- ☐ C. P. A. Coaching
- ☐ Industrial Management
- ☐ Modern Foremanship
- ☐ Business English
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Effective Speaking
- ☐ Stenotypy

Name..... Age.....

Position..... Address.....

Royal ELECTRIC SHAVER 1.98

Get A Clean, Smooth Shave!



Here's how a high grade electric shaver at a popular price. Not just another shaver, but a quality product, built to compare with any shaver on the market—not in price—but in smooth, clean shaving. Finely ground, hard steel stropping edges insure you a CLOSE SHAVE.

YOU TRY IT! Let this shaver put it through every test. It takes off the long and short whiskers with equal ease, rapidly and efficiently. No pull, no chafing, no lathering, no fussing, no water, no soap. Just plug in the socket, and you're ready to start. 60 cycle, AC

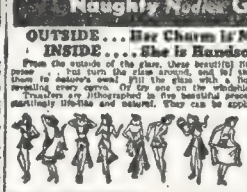
OUR SPECIAL PRICE $1.98

Deluxe Gift Model Shaver similar to above in velvet lined case and a fine, corrosion grade steel cutter. Generally nervous users prefer this model. PRICE ONLY $2.69

guaranteeing you extra years of close, easy shaving. Deluxe razor comes attractively packed in gift box.

Naughty Nudes Glass Transfers

OUTSIDE . . . Her Charm is Modestly Concealed
INSIDE . . . She is Handsomely Revealed!



From the outside of the glass, these beautiful little ladies are shown to modest perfection. But turn the glass around, and by their unique design cause any liquid to assume a lens effect, fill the glass with a liquid and she becomes vividly revealing every curve. Or try one on the windshield of your car. Transfers are lithographed in five beautiful process colors, so that the girls look startlingly life-like and natural. They can be applied easily in a few seconds, to any glass. Picture are 2¾ high. Set of 6 . . . . . 25c
Transfers, Only 59c
Complete Set of 6 different Nudes Transfers . . . . .

3 For 25c

NUDIES GLASSES We can also supply the NUDIES GLASSES, a beautiful sparkling, crystal-like glasses with 6 different figures. Finest grade. Price Per Set of Six $1.98

BIG ENTERTAINER

Radio Controlled Model Boat & Plans

10c Each — 3 FOR 25c

CHORUS QUEENS or Lives of Hotcha Chorus Girls

This book reveals the intimate secrets and fascinating pastimes in the lives of famous Broadway hoofer girls. It tells you in vivid detail every move they make from the time they get up until the time they go to bed. Although there has been a lot of talk and discussion about chorus girls, few people seem to know exactly what they do. Now, for the first time a famous author takes you behind the scenes and gives you an intimate glimpse into the secret back stage. Get this book now—supply limited. Price Postpaid, Only 10c

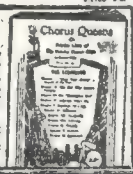
Confessions of A Minister's Daughter

An interesting and fascinating book which tells the life of a minister's daughter in her personal diary. Full of thrills and romance. Price 10c

Confessions of a Taxi Dancer

Explains how the blase dance girls earn a living, what they do for pleasure and for profit. Interesting facts about these girls. Price 10c

ALL 3 BOOKS IN ONE JUMBO VOLUME, Only 25c



JU-JITSU POINT BY POINT ILLUSTRATED

The complete art of self-defense by means of attack and defense. Illustrated with 32 photographs. Easily understood. Book fully illustrated with pictures, showing how to defend yourself against knife attack, defense against revolver, standing up, defense against holds, handcuff holding a man down, defense against choking, defense against bear hug, defense against two assailants, defense against three assailants, defense against throw, secret thumb knockout, defense against kicks, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself against any attack. Be master of circumstances. Fear no one. Price 30c

New Book of 50 Tricks Of Self Defense, Only 25c

BROADCAST thru your radio TALK - SING - PLAY

BROADCAST your voice on programs coming through your own radio set—whether wise cracks, jokes and monologs, radio blues, popular crooning, singing, radio acting, etc. Do a Bing Crosby, Charlie Mccarthy, Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor, etc.

World Mike

Made especially for home use, attached to a lady without tools. Not a toy. Put on your own programs at home, social club affairs, etc. Battery of Two Easy Cells.

Price Only 25c

DELUXE MIKE

Latest, superior, all metal mike. Prefer for use with public address systems and phonograph outfits. Four conductor cable. Has volume control. Standard screw base. Complete with Instruction Sheet. Easy to make connections to radio. Postpaid $1.00

BLANK CARTRIDGE PISTOL

$1.00 50c

Revolver Style

Well made and of the finest materials throughout. Takes 32 Blank Cartridges (not included). Fires with a loud report. Ideal for burglar alarm, signaling without the danger attached to other revolvers. Price for this style pistol. Four shots only. Postpaid $1.00

Blank Cartridges, Box of 50 . . . . . 50c

Blank Cartridges, Box of 100 . . . . . $1.00

TALK over these TELEPHONES 10 cents each

No Batteries, No Electricity - Just Talk!

Here is a set of phones with which carries the voice perfectly for distances from 50 to 100 feet. And they sell for only 10c a pair! Use no battery or electricity—just talk. Connect one phone to another, from room to room, to office, etc. Each phone sets both sender and receiver. Complete with 100 feet of wire and instructions.

Carry one you can't hear! You should get a pair and arrange telephone service between your best boy friend and your best girl friend and save the tolls.

Price Per Set Only 10c

Postpaid, Set of 10 Sets, Telephones Only $1.00

BOY ELECTRICIAN 10c

With 75 illustrations on making flame tongue rings, etc. 10c

THROW YOUR VOICE

Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

THE VENTRILO

A little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls, etc. Anyone can use it. Never fails. A complete book with full course in Ventriloquism and Ventrilo together for only 10c

Talking Bunny Bank

Cute bunny holds up hand. Puts coins inside. Bunny has another voice so you can make him say "Thank you." Price Only 59c

Climbing Glove Monkey Dummy

Looks like a glove, so you manipulate hand and hands with fingers climbs. Real black, bushy tail. Funny face. Lots of fun. Price 59c

MIDGET POCKET RADIO $1.00

Listen to Music and Sports Everywhere You Go

This amazing . . . pocket radio comes to you complete with 52 miles of broadcasting stations. Tunes clear under favorable conditions—even as far as Canada and Mexico. Has everywhere tuning coil, aerial and ground wire. Uses single headset. Can be heard by bystanders. No batteries to replace. Just one penlight battery (not included) needed. Size 3½ x 2½ x 1¼.

MIDGET POCKET RADIO Price $1.00

1-Tube Pocket Radio

Built in frame. Music comes RADIO clear. Latest Cathedral type. Has built-in antenna. Tunes broadcasting stations. Easy to operate. Uses ordinary flashlight battery. Complete $3.49

REPEATING SLING SHOT

Powerful . . . Accurate . . . Deadly . . . Shoots stones, marbles, etc. Has a range of 100 feet. Can be used for hunting, target practice, etc. Made of finest materials throughout. Rubber bands are of extra heavy quality. Price 25c

Extra Rubber Bands, Pair 10c

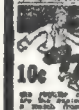
Student's Microscope Set

Here's a wonderful scientific set. A complete student's microscope, with 3 objectives, magnifying 50, 100 and 300 times. Also 3 wonders of the world, study skin, tissues, insects, etc. Also 3 specimens, ready for study. Complete with instructions. Price Postpaid 39c

Radio Noise Filter

Plug filter into outlet before radio is plugged in. Eliminates all kinds of noise disturbances, whether from electrical appliances or motors. Easy to attach. Simply plug in. Price 35c

Midget Bible



Over 800 pages of text. Size 2½ x 3½ x ¾. Price Postpaid 15c

Electric Baseball & Football Games

Completely Electric - Hundreds of Scientific Plays

BASEBALL

Electric pitcher pitches to batter. Batter hits ball. Fielders field ball. Batter runs around bases. Batter is put out by electricity. Over 100 different plays. Batter hits ball in different directions. Batter hits high, wide, low balls. Batter bunts. Batter hits fouls. Batter hits home runs. Batter hits triples. Batter hits doubles. Batter hits singles. Batter is put out at Home, at 1st, 2nd or 3rd base. Batter is put out by fly ball. Batter is put out by foul ball. Batter is put out by strike out. Batter is put out by pop fly. Batter is put out by line drive. Batter is put out by ground ball. Batter is put out by sacrifice. Batter is put out by double play. Batter is put out by triple play. Batter is put out by home run. Batter is put out by inside the park home run. Batter is put out by outside the park home run. Batter is put out by grand slam home run. Batter is put out by bases loaded. Batter is put out by no runs. Batter is put out by no hits. Batter is put out by no errors. Batter is put out by no men on base. Batter is put out by no men on first. Batter is put out by no men on second. Batter is put out by no men on third. Batter is put out by no men on home. Batter is put out by no men on bases. Batter is put out by no men on base. Batter is put out by no men on first base. Batter is put out by no men on second base. Batter is put out by no men on third base. Batter is put out by no men on home base

IMAGINE THEIR JOY

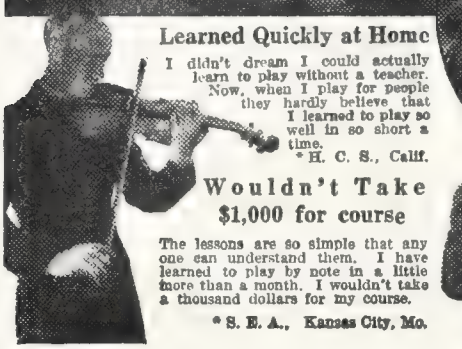
WHEN THEY FOUND THEY COULD PLAY

This easy as A.B.C. way!

Plays on Radio

I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.

*W. H. S., Alabama.



Learned Quickly at Home

I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now, when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time.

*H. C. S., Calif.

Wouldn't Take $1,000 for course

The lessons are so simple that any one can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.

*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Surprised Friends

I want to say that my friends are greatly surprised at the different pieces I can already play. I am very happy to have chosen your method of learning.

*B. F., Bronx, N. Y.

Best Method by Far

Enclosed is my last examination sheet for my course in Tenor Banjo. This completes my course. I have taken lessons before under teachers, but my instructions with you were by far the best.

*A. O., Minn.

What Instrument Would You Like To Play?

JUST name your instrument and we'll show you how you can learn to play it—quickly, easily, in spare time at home. Never mind if you don't know one note of music from another—don't worry about "special talent." And forget all you've ever heard about music's being hard to learn.

The truth of the matter is that *thousands now play who never thought they could!* Yes, men and women everywhere have discovered this amazingly easy way to learn music at home. Now they are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of playing the piano, violin, guitar, saxophone or other favorite instruments. Some of them are playing in orchestras and over the radio; others are teaching music, making money in spare or full time. And thousands are having the time of their lives playing for their own enjoyment and the entertainment of their friends.

It all came about when they wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the Free Booklet and Demonstration Lesson that show you how EASY it is to learn music at home this modern way. No tedious study and practice, no tiresome exercises. You learn to play *by playing*—start right in almost at once with the melody of a simple tune! It takes only a few minutes a day and the cost is trifling; you save the expense of a private teacher. Does it sound too good to be true? Mail the coupon and get the FREE PROOF! (Our forty-first year—Est. 1898.) U. S. School of Music, 2941 Brunswick Bldg., N. Y. C., N. Y.

SEND FOR FREE DEMONSTRATION LESSON AND BOOKLET

● You'll open your eyes when you find how quickly and easily you can learn to play your favorite instrument. Don't doubt; don't hesitate. Send for the fascinating illustrated booklet that answers all your questions; let the free demonstration lesson show you how this method actually works. There's no cost, no obligation. Just mail the coupon, NOW. (Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.)

**Actual pupil's names on request. Pictures by professional models.*

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
2941 Brunswick Bldg., New York City, N. Y.

Without cost or obligation to me, please send me your free illustrated booklet and demonstration lesson. I am interested in the instrument checked below.

Piano	Hawaiian Guitar	Clarinet
Violin	Banjo	Trombone
Guitar	Mandolin	Flute
Piano Accordion	Ukulele	Piccolo
Plain Accordion	Cornet	Organ
Saxophone	Trumpet	Drums and Traps
Cello	Harp	Modern Elementary Harmony
		Voice Culture

Have You This Instru?

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Mr. Mattingly & Mr. Moore spin a tale of finer whiskey!

"Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
How can we retain our
native modesty...

"When folks holler from the
tree-tops:
'M & M is really THE tops
For its mellow flavor
and its quality!'"

"Yes, Mr. Moore,
Yes, Mr. Moore,
These ovations make me blush
till I turn pink...

"And the reason,—er—ahem—is
That our whiskey, M & M, is
Slow-distilled for glorious goodness,
yet priced lower than you'd think!"

There are lots of reasons why YOU should start enjoying this fine, mellow, slow-distilled whiskey, at once!

One reason—M & M is ALL whiskey, every drop in every bottle! Another reason—it is *a blend of straight whiskies*...the kind of whiskey we believe is *tops!*

There are more reasons—but have the pleasure of discovering them for yourself! Ask for M & M, at your favorite bar or package store, *today*. And, here's one more reason you should try M & M—the price is amazingly LOW!

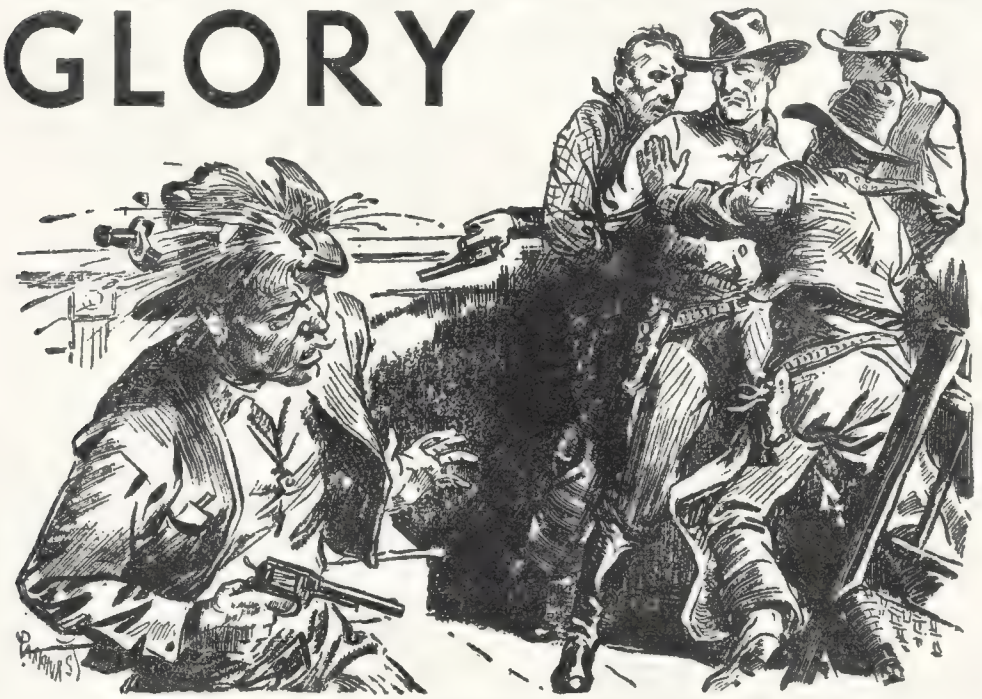
Mattingly & Moore

Long on Quality—Short on Price!

A blend of straight whiskies—100% straight whiskies—90 proof.
Frankfort Distilleries, Incorporated, Louisville and Baltimore.

VOL. 3, NO. 3 RANGE RIDERS FEBRUARY, 1939

GUN TRAIL TO GLORY



As the guns cleared leather, the whiskey bottle struck the sheepman (Chap. II)

Three Men Ride Into a Raw, Riotous Land to Clean Up a Bitter Range Feud and Establish Justice!

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

Author of "The Long Noose," "Manna from Texas," etc.

CHAPTER I

Two Wrong Guesses

SADDLE-SORE and trail-weary, three comrades rode northward through the dusk. They were traveling light, but were heavily armed, and there was a money belt about the waist of each. There was something grimly portentious in the way they rode—as though they were fleeing the law, or carrying it with them.

"So this is Montana," commented the shortest of the three, peering across the darkening prairie. "She don't look any different than Wyomin' to me."

He was a chunky, thick-set little man, narrowly missing being fat. His

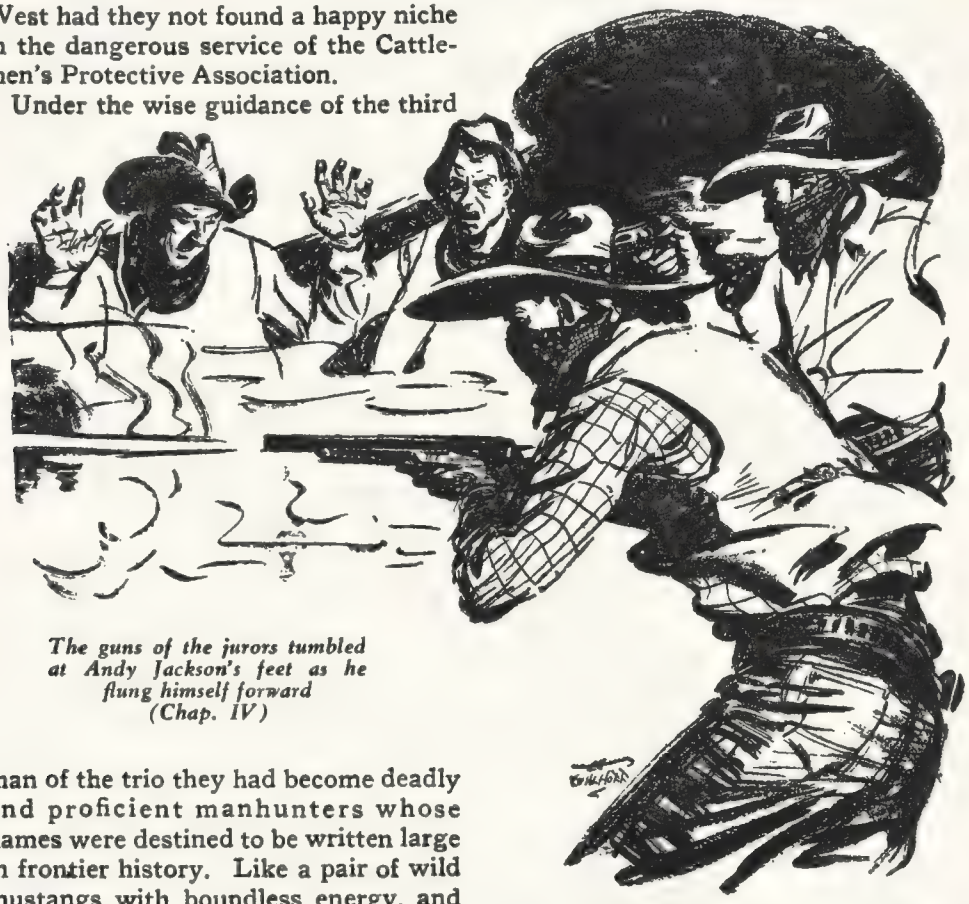
chubby face had a perpetual good-natured look, and his pale blue eyes blinked weakly like those of an owl in the sunlight. Careless of dress, almost slouchy, his Stetson cocked perkily above a lick of disarranged brown hair, "Dusty" Trail was typically the jolly cowboy. With a couple of shots of red-eye under his belt and a half-chewed cigar in one corner of his mouth his very appearance invited friendship and provoked laughter. More than one frontier bully had learned to his personal sorrow that looks were deceitful.

"She's been Montana ever since we crossed the Wyomin' line 'fore noon. I was up here once with a Goodnight trail herd. Ever been here before, Doc?"

Nobody would have mistaken this speaker for other than he was. "Hank" Ball was a red-headed young hell-bender with flashing blue eyes and an impudent but winning smile about his fine lips. Utterly fearless, equally proficient with guns or fists, he preferred a fight to the finest meal. Because of his sheer deviltry and recklessness, and Dusty Trails' penchant for inviting trouble, the pair of young demons might have become scourges of the

West had they not found a happy niche in the dangerous service of the Cattlemen's Protective Association.

Under the wise guidance of the third man of the trio they had become deadly and proficient manhunters whose names were destined to be written large in frontier history. Like a pair of wild mustangs with boundless energy, and intoxicated with the spirit of youth and adventure, just in time had they been thrown into the company of their older companion.



The guns of the jurors tumbled at Andy Jackson's feet as he flung himself forward (Chap. IV)

"No," answered the third man, in his rich pleasant voice, "this is virgin country to me."

Hank Ball glanced at him. "I reckon yuh won't have no trouble makin' yoreself at home," he commented drily.

Stephen Reese, "Doc" to his friends, smiled. A man in his early thirties, tall, his black hair graying handsomely at the temples, and with dark eyes that seemed to have the power to search the very bottom of a man's soul, he was not a native Westerner. A splendid shot, an excellent horseman, a formidable antagonist in a fist fight, Reese had come from St. Louis to take charge of the Corps of detectives employed by the cattle association. Formerly a lieutenant of police, he had been hired for just such remarkable qualities as he possessed.

HE looked more like a professor than a policeman. His black eyes did not belie his piercing mind. Where gunfighters came a dime a dozen, men like Steve Reese were rare. His greatest power lay in his mental

attainments. With the unerring precision of a mathematical machine he took the jumbled facts of a given situation, analyzed and correlated them, and reached an accurate solution while other men were still stumbling around seeking light.

With two such able lieutenants as Hank Ball and Dusty Trail to follow up his deductions and carry out his orders, the three made an invincible team.

"Better go over our plans again, Doc," said Trail. "We oughta be gittin' close to Elkhorn."

"Be there 'fore moonrise," offered Hank Ball. "Looks like a ranchin' spread off yonder to the left."

Reese gazed through the gathering dusk, but could distinguish no buildings. He had not the narrow-lidded penetrating gaze of his two companions who had spent their lives gazing at distant horizons.

"All we have to go on is that urgent call for help from the Montana Stock Growers' Union, saying that its main organizer had been killed along with some other men, and that a range war between sheep and cattle raisers was brewing," Reese replied. "I thought we'd blow into town and survey things before we make definite plans. We're just three roving cowhands from Kansas."

At the approaching sounds of hoofs from down the valley they reined up to listen. Out of the dusk poured a dozen riders, cutting their trail at right angles.

"Hands on the way to the chuckhouse over yonder," opined Hank.

A hail came through the gathering night.

"Halloo! Mike? Eddie? That you?"

"Halloo yoreself," called back Dusty Trail. "We're hungry cowhands, but we ain't Mike and Eddie."

A startled yell arose from the distant halted group.

"Cattlemen!" yelped a voice. "By Gawd, men, we've caught 'em over here red-handed, pizenin' our water holes!"

A rifle cracked, and the bullet whined uncomfortably close to Reese's head.

"Let 'em have it, Woolies!" bellowed an irate voice.

And six-shooters began blasting as the entire group came on in a sudden charge.

"Hell's catoot!" grunted Dusty Trail. "Them's sheepmen! We're on the wrong side."

"Don't!" Reese commanded sharply, as both his companions drew guns. "Cut to the right. Ride around them."

Wheeling his own mount he urged it into a reckless gallop along the way the attacking horsemen had come.

"Our nags is too tired to make it, Doc," complained Hank. "We oughta shoot it out with them jaspers. I ain't got no sympathy for sheepmen, anyhow."

"As Association detectives, we're neutral, Hank," said Reese. "Don't forget that. Ride!"

In spite of the jaded condition of their mounts, the trio galloped down the valley, a move so unexpected that for a moment it baffled the attackers. Then pursuit settled down in grim earnest. Strung out in a lengthening line, the sheepmen thundered after the fleeing trio. Only the darkness and this ragged chase prevented the three from being shot out of the saddle.

OBVIOUSLY the pursuers had weary mounts, too, for the pursuit slowly fell behind. But it was touch and go for a few minutes. At last, having outdistanced their attackers, Reese slowed his laboring horse to a walk.

"Now, what the hell?" said Hank Ball hotly, reining alongside him.

"We seem to be in sheep territory," said Reese drily. "Let's cut north again and be getting on to Elkhorn."

"Did yuh hear what them jaspers said?" Hank demanded indignantly. "Accusin' cattlemen of poisonin' waterholes!"

"Yes, I heard," replied Reese gravely. "Either one of you boys hit?"

"Nope," Dusty answered. "But I sure miscalled our callin'."

They jogged on through the night, Hank and Dusty slowly cooling off under the collar. As the stars began popping into existence in the velvety dome overhead, they set their course by the North Star and rode onward in the direction of Elkhorn.

There was no further sign of their attackers. After a circle of several miles they returned to the trail they had been following. A light twinkled ahead of them, and they urged their weary horses forward.

Soon the outlines of a cluster of buildings took denser form. As they neared, they saw a small campfire with men standing about it. The deep bay of a hound rose on the night air, followed by the sharper barking of a couple of collies.

"Well, I reckon we've struck a woollie settlement this time," grunted Hank. "What d'yuh suppose them herders are doin'? Shearin' sheep in the dark? Halloo there!"

"Halloo!" a man at the campfire called back. "Who is it?"

"Three sheepherders from Wyomin'!" Dusty bellowed loudly. "How about tellin' us how far to Elkhorn?"

"Sheepherders?" yelled the spokesman. "Did yuh men hear that? By hell, they shoot our stock, and now they're already migratin' in to take up our range!"

"Give it to 'em, boys!" yelled another voice. "Remember what happened to Frank Jackson!"

A volley of six-gun shots tore through the night, and the men on foot came running madly toward the three horsemen. Bullets whistled around them. With one accord the astonished trio whirled their spent horses and spurred them into a lagging gallop. Shots and dog barks followed them across the prairie. Had this second band of attackers been mounted there would have been no escape.

Safely out of range of the horseless cattlemen, Dusty drew rein angrily.

"What kind of a damn country is this?" he demanded hotly. "Sheepherders ridin' like honest cattle hands, and cowmen on foot with dogs!"

"Looks like yuh miscalled yore shot again, Dusty," drawled Hank. "Just what the hell are we, anyhow, Doc? Rabbits?"

Reese was laughing.

"I'm reminded of the Dutchman in Missouri during the Civil War," he said. "When the Federals came he said he was a Southerner, and they took everything loose on the place. When the Confederates came he said he was a Northerner, and they took all he had left. The next time he said, 'By golly, I'm noddings!' It looks like we are going to be nothing, boys."

DUSTY grunted sourly. "That ain't no joke, and this mess ain't one, either. It looks like hell is already poppin' in Montana."

"She shore is," Hank agreed happily. "Poisonin' water-holes, shootin' stock—and both sides on the warpath. I reckon that courtroom shootin' blew the lid off. Well, let's be gettin' on. Elkhorn can't be more'n five miles up the trail."

"We're not going to Elkhorn tonight, boys," Reese said gravely.

"Huh? Why not?" asked Dusty, puzzled.

"We're big enough to stand on our hind legs," Hank protested. "And in town we won't have to play guessin' games about who's who."

"On the contrary, boys," went on their leader, "it looks like we've got a lot of guessing to do. Granting that the cattlemen and sheepmen have gone to war over the killing of Frank Jackson, as we've heard, did you ever hear of good cattlemen poisoning waterholes? Did you ever hear of honest

sheepmen slaughtering steers?"

"Mebbe they ain't all honest," observed Dusty. "Latigo Smith wasn't. Yuh remember him."

"Yes, I remember," Reese said. "Because of that, I'm changing our plans. Somebody is playing a deep game up here, and we've got to find out what it is mighty quick. There's no sense to our riding in to Elkhorn and tipping our hand off before we know the lay of the land."

"But they're expectin' us," protested Hank.

"True," Reese nodded. "But they don't know who's coming, or when. The Missouri Dutchman has given me an idea. We're going to join both sides."

"Yeah," said Hank, "that's fine. Then both sides can line up and take shots at us."

"Not the way we'll play it. We will separate. Hank, you look the part; so you're going to be a rich young cattle raiser from Omaha. You've come to this country to buy or build a spread of beef cattle. We'll have the Association ship you a few head of registered stock from Chicago. Your job will be to get in solid with the cattlemen hereabouts.

"Dusty, the meager report I got from headquarters mentions a Bill Elwood, a sheep raiser who seems to be the leader of the herders. Your job will be to get a job with him. I—"

"Whoa!" interrupted Dusty, hastily. "I ain't even got a speakin' acquaintance with mutton. I don't even know when female sheep calve. I ain't got no use for—"

"Sheep lamb, Dusty; they do not calve," Reese went on calmly. "And this is not the season, so you'll be safe. Your job is to herd the sheepherders, not the sheep. Get in with Elwood."

"Hell!" wailed Dusty. "Me workin' on a sheep ranch! Pa will turn over in his grave."

"As for me," Reese said frowning, "I want to have as much freedom of movement as possible. So I shall be a geologist—or a mining engineer. But, first of all, we must go over to Lamar Junction and get all the information we can about this district and see about the proper trappings for our respective callings."

"Lamar Junction?" complained Hank. "That's forty miles east o' here."

"Right. So let's be moving. We'll make dry camp over in the hills when the moon rises. I don't want any one of us seen hereabouts until we arrive in our various roles. I'll arrange to get in touch with each of you as quickly as possible. Come on."

And silently the three horsemen jogged wearily eastward, silhouetted against a dark sky.

CHAPTER II

Interrupted Clash

THE events leading up to the coming of the three association detectives to Montana were stormy.

Montana, newly created a state, was in the throes of legal birth. Senator Thaddeus Kemp, rising political power who represented the cattle interests, was as busy as a cranberry merchant between his big ranch northwest of Elkhorn and the raw and quivering new capital, Helena. There was only one railroad line across the state, far to the north. The only transportation in the south was the stagecoach line from Lamar through Elkhorn and westward to Butte.

Everywhere new counties were forming and new officers were being

appointed or elected. Home builders wanted law and order, security and settlement. Sheriffs were beginning to ride in each huge county, where heretofore only an occasional visit had been made by a United States marshal. The courts were slowly evolving, and men cried for judiciary action instead of shootings and lynchings.

When Frank Jackson, with the aid and advice of Senator Thad Kemp, organized the Montana Stock Growers' Union, it was with the understanding that the law would be permitted to take its proper course with any and all culprits. Hence, when with Moss Tiernan of the Boxed M, Jackson and a few of his Tumbling J riders caught four rustlers red-handed, instead of stringing them up to the nearest suitable tree, they brought the thieves into Elkhorn for a lawful trial.

Kemp County was so newly organized that it didn't even have a jail, much less a court-house. Sheriff Ted Harper, gambler and saloon owner, had been compelled to lock the prisoners in the cellar of the Three Fingers Saloon among his own liquor kegs. The Tomahawk dancehall, property of Howard Thorpe, owner of the stage line, was the only structure large enough for a court. Obligingly Thorpe granted permission for its use, just before taking the eastbound stage to Lamar on business.

Judge Samuel Tankard, "Shoutin' Sam" to his associates, first jurist of the new county, spasmodic preacher and itinerant gunsmith, may have been short on law, but he was long on horse sense. While the juridical usurpation of "the best damn entertainment house in Montana" was resented by every faction save the determined cattlemen, there was a lively interest in the goings on.

Hall of justice by day, haul of hell by night, the Tomahawk was crowded with spectators. The first problem

Steve Reese

was the impaneling of a jury. There were not enough cattlemen property owners, and none of the sheepmen would volunteer to serve. In fact, they would have been promptly challenged by the cattle ranchers.

The citizens of Elkhorn, depending on both factions for business, refused the dubious honor of sitting on the jury. Feeling was running high between sheep and cattle raisers, and the townsfolk were playing no favorites. Judge Tankard promptly cut that Gordian knot by deeding seven cowboys a lot each in Elkhorn, for which the infant Cattle Raisers' Association put up the required hundred and seventy-five dollars.

TEXAS, that giant beehive of the cattle industry, was coming out of the decade of chaos which followed the Civil War. The State had assumed control of all public lands and was selling or leasing to private individuals who were busily erecting miles of barbed-wire fences.

The loose methods of men helping themselves to the scattered and un-

branded herds of their neighbors and to hell with morals and ethics were being stamped out by determined cattlemen and that growing power known as the Cattlemen's Protective Association. Other states were following suit in the organization of cattle unions to protect stock growers and duly registered brand marks. It was a bitter enough struggle to combat outlaws and thieving Indians.

In desperation cattle growers were migrating northward for free range and plenty of open grazing land, attempting to carry law and order with them. Thus, in the early '80s several notable forces were contending for supremacy in Montana, a virgin land of water, buffalo grass, and open range.

The introduction of shorthorns and Herefords into the stringy and wild longhorn herds was building up beef stock to where cattle were far more valuable for meat and dairy products than simply for horns and hides. The railroads became aware of the vastness of this new market opening up, and were webbing their way westward.

Eastern capital had awakened to the rich mineral deposits of the rugged hills, and was bent on exploiting the mining industry. Sheep growers were increasingly alive to the crisis of cattle. Outlaws hotly contested the encroachment of civilization with its attendant restrictions. While the Indian tribes contested damned near everything.

It was in such country that, locked away, weaponless, in the gloomy cellar of the Three Fingers Saloon with no company save the sturdy oak kegs of unbroached whiskey, the four rustlers proceeded to remedy their plight. "Bass" Marlowe, the hulking leader of the quartet, displayed a remarkable ingenuity. Having tested the solidity of the barrel heads with his hard knuckles, he sat down in the semi-darkness of the unique prison and removed his left boot.

With infinite patience, the four rustlers scraped up damp earth from the tamped floor and packed it in the boot until it attained the weight and rigidity of a leather pickax. Then, while his companions sang lustily to cover the noise, Marlowe assaulted a likely-looking keg in first-rate mining style. Even an oaken barrel head couldn't withstand such a persuasive argument.

When Sheriff Harper and his cowmen deputies arrived to haul the prisoners into court they found the quartet uproariously drunk. The case had to be postponed until the following morning. The culprits were deprived of their boots, the cattlemen were assessed for five gallons of whiskey, and Bass Marlowe achieved the soubriquet of "Bootleg Bass."

That night the Three Fingers Saloon seethed with excitement. It was crowded with cattlemen and sheepmen. Frank Jackson, fiery little ex-Texan, main spring of the new Stock Growers' Union, was eloquently holding forth at the bar.

"It ain't important what happens to them four coyotes downstairs," he harangued his audience, "but this here's a test whether law has come to Kemp County, or whether we're gonna hafta use rope and guns. We've done o r g a n i z e d this cattlemen's union, and we got to stand back of it solid—or she ain't no good. Any country fit to live in has got to have law and order. So what Senator Kemp is doin' for the whole State of Montana is up to us to do for the county named after him."

ROARS of approval greeted his words. Range men, grim-faced and weathered, clapped him on the back and endorsed his utterances with hearty oaths. Andy, his ruddy-cheeked son, signaled the barkeep to

fill up the glasses. Thus handsomely encouraged, the bow-legged old fire-eater spoke on.

"What with changin' conditions the past few years, we been forced to come to Montana for free range. But, by grabs, we didn't bring along the practice of helpin' yoreself to yore neighbor's stock!"

Toward the rear of the bar a number of sheep raisers were drinking and glowering. The mention of the name of Senator Thaddeus Kemp was like waving a red flag in front of a mad bull.

"Crowdin' out the sheep raisers don't count," an unidentified voice sneered.

At these words, an uneasy silence settled over the room. Setting down his glass, Frank Jackson thrust his way through the ring of men about him and squinted along the counter.

"Did you say that, Bill Elwood?" he demanded tersely.

One of the sheepmen turned. He was a tall, sparely built, moustached man of middle age, with sharply cut features. His eyes were a bleak gray, like winter ice at the water-holes. Elwood had fought Indians and blizzards, wolves and mountain lions, disease and disaster to found his woollie dynasty. From lambing time in the fall to shearing time in the spring, he knew the sheep business. Fighting the influx of cattlemen was for him just another river to cross.

Deliberately he frowned down from his impressive height at the shorter Jackson. He appeared to consider the question, his very deliberation almost an insult.

"No," he said at length in a soft voice, "I didn't say that. But I don't see much wrong with the remark—since yuh call it to my attention, Jackson."

For a crowded place the arena in front of the Three Fingers' bar became mighty desolate. The careful

Dusty Trail

levity, the forced gaiety faded away like dissolving fabric, exposing the stark skeleton of ugly facts which had been there all the time—strong men's aims and ambitions that ran counter to each other. Cattle and sheep! Two of the oldest and most important friends of man, in themselves emblematic of peace, plenty, prosperity, yet so incompatible as to be the cause of the West's bitterest and bloodiest feuds.

Jackson's keen old eyes narrowed, and his lips tautened while his leathery neck reddened. His left foot slid forward with a soft, scrunching sound in the sawdust, and his right hand spread slowly open. The stance of a man ready and willing to claw for his shooting iron.

Elwood, recognized spokesman for all the sheep growers on the Elkhorn range, did not move. But he stiffened significantly, then relaxed on the balls of his feet. His chill gaze never left the cattleman's face.

Brave and stubborn men, this pair, each bitterly opposed to all the other represented. Typical champions of

two of the several forces struggling for supremacy on this new frontier where authority was worn on the hip, and men with the steadiest hands and keenest eyes had the best arguments.

THE head bartender looked around anxiously for his employer, but Sheriff Harper was not in evidence. The owner of the Three Fingers was known to be strictly impartial. In fact, it was a moot question whether he was going to make a good sheriff or a good politician.

Over at the Tomahawk, men were merrily laughing and dancing, out on the prairie the night wind was blowing free, in the domed vault of heaven friendly stars were twinkling down on the placidly drifting herds and flocks of cattleman and sheepman alike. But here beneath the flickering coal-oil lamps grim tragedy was in the making.

"Bill Elwood," the old cowman grated, "where I come from men don't make fight talk unless they're plumb ready to fight. Personal, I ain't had no trouble with yuh till yet, and mebbe yuh ain't lookin' for trouble with me. So I'm givin' yuh a chance to take back yore insult. Start talkin' or start drawin'."

The sheepman chose to talk. What he said was a mouthful.

"I don't know who passed that remark, Jackson," he reiterated. "I don't care two hoots in hell. I wasn't thinkin' 'bout you in particular when I seconded the motion—if that's what yuh wanna hear me say. But I ain't takin' back my opinion that she was a danged to-the-point sorta speech. So if the hat fits yuh, and yuh wanna wear it—pull 'er plumb down over yore ears and make yore play!"

"Now, gents," begged the barman. "Gents! Please—"

"Ba-a-a-a!" bawled a derisive voice in the background.

Jackson's fierce old eyes sparkled fire as his hand dropped to clamp on the butt of his six-shooter.

"Damn yuh, sheepherder!" he snarled. "Yuh asked for it!"

Young Andy Jackson, lithe, taller than his father, more interested in breeding up beef stock than in fighting over free range, uttered an exclamation of dismay. Granite-faced Moss Tierman, of the Boxed M, grabbed him with a horny hand to pull him out of the line of fire.

"Leave be, kid," he warned. "Yuh'll git him killed."

Bill Elwood, his face like the changeless mountains which overlooked his sheep range, hell glinting in his eyes, matched the old Texan's draw. Whether either man would have survived the shooting fracas is doubtful. It never came off. Just as the guns cleared leather a hurled whiskey bottle flashed under the lamp, thrown from the opposite side of the saloon, and struck the angular sheepman squarely on the head.

Elwood staggered against the bar with no sound above the dull *smack* of the missile, and went down. Folding at the knees like an accordion-pleated man, he slumped and then pitched over on his face almost at the feet of his enemy. Andy Jackson tore himself free and lunged forward to grapple with his father.

"Dad!" he cried. "Don't!"

But the old man had already stayed his hand with his hammer at full cock. He was whirling to glare ferociously at the shrinking crowd.

"What dirty buzzard flung that liker bottle?" he shouted. "Even a woollie man has the right to die like a gent."

A roar of anger went up as cattlemen and sheepmen drew guns and surged forward. Hell had cracked open, and the flames were blazing above the surface. The head bartender took one last despairing look at the back bar with its plate glass mir-

ror, its pyramids of shining glassware, its double row of fancy liquor bottles, groaned and dived for the floor behind the counter.

IT was at this instant that the batwings slammed open, and a man barged in at a dead run. He raced past the onsurging cattlemen and reached the fallen sheep raiser.

"Hold on, men!" his voice cut through the uproar as he raised both empty hands in a commanding gesture. "Stop where yuh are!"

Dressed in black broadcloth and Prince Albert coat, glossy black half-boots, a snow-white Stetson on his curly dark hair, a star gleaming on his lapel, his black eyes flashing, the owner of the Three Fingers was an arresting figure. His lean face, habitually pale and inscrutable, broke in a slight smile as his mellow voice went on.

"No fighting in here, men," he stated in a manner which hinted at regret, but permitted no exceptions to the rule. "Out on the range yuh may have yore differences, but yuh can't iron 'em out in the Three Fingers. This is a neutral spot where everybody's welcome. Remember that—for always. Away from here I'll do my best as a fair sheriff, but here I'm yore friend and host first. It wasn't in the contract that yuh'd use my house as a pistol gallery to shoot out yore grudges. If yuh want me to keep on bein' sheriff, yuh'll have to respect that point. Now, put up yore guns, every man jack of yuh, and have a drink on the house. Peters, gimme that seltzer bottle."

The bottle was handed over and the sheriff knelt to squirt the carbonated liquid in the unconscious man's face with the air of a man who had the utmost confidence in the effect of his words. The psychology worked. Ted Harper was proving to be both sheriff and politician.

"But, dammit, Harper," fumed Jackson, holstering his guns, "that mutton eater the same as accused me of stealin' his land."

"The hell he did," grunted Harper, propping the reviving Elwood against his knee. "Montana's the third largest state in the Union, and I guess there's room enough for all of us here. Feel better, Elwood? Then climb on yore feet and belly the bar with me and this old hellion from Texas, and don't argue."

Bill Elwood felt his jaw gingerly, shook his head, and got slowly to his feet. He eyed Jackson silently as the sheriff picked up his gun and thrust it into his holster for him. Jackson returned the stare. The sheriff grabbed each by an arm and swung them to face the counter as his head barman got to his feet, sheepishly brushing the sawdust out of his mustache.

"My hide-out barkeep," Harper said, grinning. "All right, Finch, three fingers of our best whiskey for every cowman and sheepman in the house—if them four galoots in the cellar haven't drunk up all our best stock."

CHAPTER III

Guilty As Hell!

FRIDAY the thirteenth, the day of the Bootleg Bass Marlowe trial, was shaken lightly out of his bag of infinite tomorrows by Father Time. It was a day and a date never to be forgotten in Montana.

But it dawned unpretentiously, stealing softly out of the east to stalk the shadows of mountain and valley, prairie and mesa, driv-

ing them westward with arrows of light and then blasting them out of existence with roseate streamers and lances from the diaphanous robes of Aurora. In plain Western lingo, it was d a y b r e a k of another damn scorcher.

Judge Sam Tankard was a bachelor and a resident of the Stag Hotel. At seven o'clock he said grace over his breakfast in the dining room, stowed away the victuals, clapped his Quaker style low-crowned, broad-brimmed black hat on his head and set forth.

His Honor was a big, florid-faced man with rugged features. He narrowly missed being pot-bellied by the grace of having the general build of a blacksmith, with mighty arms, a huge frame, and legs like tree trunks. He weighed well over two h u n d r e d pounds and had a voice like a foghorn.

When he first came to Elkhorn he said that he had had to give up circuit riding because he rode all his horses sway-backed until he was walking anyhow. Besides, he was a better gunsmith than a preacher. The result, he said, was the same, whether you shouted or shot men to Heaven. The idea was to get 'em there.

Making his way along the sidewalk of stone flagging which had been quarried and laid by public-spirited property owners to indicate the town's permanence, the judge reached his gun shop across the street from the Three Fingers. He opened for business and proceeded to file the dog on George Peavey's second best six-shooter.

He was reassembling the weapon for its owner when Tom Suggs, his journeyman gunsmith, showed up to take charge of the shop. Soundly berating the yawning Suggs for being late, the judge took off his leather apron and wiped his greasy hands.

"Charge Peavey six-bits for this job and tell him to put his faith in the Lord and be mighty damned careful with this gun now or he'll shoot his own feet off," he directed, putting on his hat. "I'm goin' to court."

"Yes, sir," Suggs mumbled sleepily. "Lots of excitement in town last night, Jedge. Cattlemen and sheepmen dern near started a war at the Three Fingers. I was up late. That's why I didn't get here early this mornin'."

"Drink is one of the pitfalls of the devil, Suggs. Remember that."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Tank—I mean, Jedge Tankard. Windin' up the Bootleg Bass case today?"

"I hope so," said His Honor, and left.

The judge stopped at Utah Jack's saloon to wet his whistle. Then he went on to the dancehall next door to the hotel. Entering the Tomahawk by the back door he mounted the musicians' platform where his table and chair had already been put in place.

Court was in session.

The debris of the night before had been swept away, and chairs and benches had been constructed out of boxes and planks and arranged in the semblance of a courtroom.

AT Judge Tankard's arrival the court clerk—fiddler and dance caller at night—rose up and yelled to the noisy crowd:

"Git up on yore hind legs, yuh lazy galoots! His Honor, Jedge Tankard, is settin'."

The sightseers shuffled to their feet. The judge surveyed them with a jaundiced eye. His gaze fastened on the filled holster of a cowboy in the front row, and he banged on his table with his fist.

"Silence in the court!" he thundered. "Where in hell's my gavel, Mr. Weaver?"

The thin clerk with an Adam's apple like a dromedary's hump produced a carpenter's maul which he handed up. The judge took it and rapped loudly on his table.

"Joe Mapes," he boomed, "there in

the front row! Didn't I give plain orders yestiddy mornin' that no guns is allowed in this court save on the officers thereof?"

Joe Mapes looked guilty. "Sam—er—Yore Honor, I plumb forgot. I was sorta whoopin' her up last night, and I went to sleep in here. I ain't been through the door this mornin'."

"Mr. Weaver, is the barrel at the door?" demanded the judge.

"Yes, Yore Honor."

"Joe, make tracks back there and shuck that gun, or keep travelin'. Anybody else in court who needs dehornin'?" Judge Tankard looked around as the cowboy reluctantly obeyed. "I

Hank Ball

ain't aimin' to have no trouble among the members — spectators present. There'll be a five-dollar fine if I catch anybody with a six-gun on 'em after the prisoners are brought in. It would be cheaper to leave yore hardware over at my gun shop where Tom Suggs will clean and oil 'em for one dollar. Clerk Weaver, where's the rest of the jury?"

There were only eight men on the two plank benches against the left wall.

"Sheriff Harper's roundin' 'em up, Yore Honor. They're helpin' him bring over the prisoners."

"Humph!" The judge cleared his throat and let his gaze probe the danger spots of his crowded court.

There was a scattering of dancehall girls in the crowd and one or two poke bonnets on primmer women, but mostly the gathering was composed of men. Tankard let his glance linger on the lean face of Bill Elwood who wore a patch on his right jaw. But the sheep rancher was sober and quiet, sitting calmly in a little group.

There was a stir at the door, and the four missing jurymen appeared with Sheriff Harper and Frank Jackson. They marched the four rustlers along the center aisle in their sock feet. There was a roar of greeting for the burly leader, Marlowe, a heavy-featured giant with a shock of matted black hair and a stubble of reddish-black beard.

"Hey, Jedge!" yelled a voice. "Ain't yuh got a rulin' 'bout clothes? One of Bootleg's boys is barefoot."

A shout of laughter, and the judge wrapped thunderously for order. Respect for the court had yet to be learned.

The four accused men were lined up on a bench directly in front of the raised platform. The four jurors, one of whom was Andy Jackson, took their places.

FRANK JACKSON, acting as public prosecutor, took his place in the cleared area between the low platform and the prisoners' bench. Sheriff Harper, immaculate in his black garb, his Prince Albert coat open to show his gold nugget watch chain and his crisscrossed gun belts, leaned against the wall beyond the prisoners and folded his arms.

He watched the proceedings with

faintly cynical eyes. He and Frank Jackson were the only standing men in the court save for the seatless spectators crowding the front door. And with the exception of the jury, they were the only armed men in the house —so far as the court knew.

Bootleg Bass Marlowe and his three companions were neither shackled nor handcuffed. Weaponless and bootless, surrounded by hostile forces, it was impossible for them to escape. They had no legal counsel. There were no lawyers in Elkhorn, and no citizen had the temerity to offer to defend them. Judge Tankard had ruled that Marlowe might legally conduct their defense.

Built like a railroad shotgun house, the Tomahawk was about a hundred feet long and fifty feet wide. It had four windows on each side, a double door at the front, and a single door at the rear. There was a bar in one front corner — closed, of course, during court.

To all intents and purposes the trial was a simple continuation of what had begun yesterday. But overnight the picture had subtly changed, though nobody seemed aware of it. Strangers had been drifting into town, presumably attracted by the court proceedings. In twos and threes hard-faced men had ridden into Elkhorn and put up at the different places, or at no place at all.

A prairie schooner had pulled into town about dusk the evening before, with half a dozen men, and had made an unobtrustive camp on the bank of Tongue River among the willows. Some of these men were now dotted here and there about the courtroom, watching proceedings with inscrutable eyes.

Judge Tankard rapped for order. Mr. Weaver sang out nasally:

"Court is now in session."

Bang! His Honor rapped once more with his gavel and fixed Frank Jackson with a stern, judicial eye.

"Proceed with the case," he ordered.

Without benefit of legal training, the cattleman neatly summed up his evidence and tossed it in a wad at the jury. In his anger he rose almost to the heights of oratory in his concluding peroration, demanding a verdict of guilty against the four sullen outlaws, and a court sentence that they be hanged out of hand.

A roar of mingled applause and comment greeted his speech. The judge r a p p e d down the noise and looked severely at the four prisoners.

"Yuh've heard the case against yuh," he stated solemnly. "Have any of yuh got anything to say in yore own defense?"

There was a moment of silence while Marlowe yawned prodigiously and shook his tangled mane of hair. Slowly he stretched, his heavy features cracking in a snarl.

"Shore," his coarse voice boomed out, as he stared from judge to jury to prosecutor and then around the courtroom. "I got a lot I could say, but 'tain't no use sayin' it. Us boys done been caught in a bear trap. We ain't got a chance in this crowd. So all I say is to hell with the whole parcel of yuh! Give us another gallon of the sheriff's likker, and then hang us and be damned to yuh!"

CHEERS and jeers. The judge pounded for order as his face grew choleric.

"Silence! Silence!" his foghorn voice bellowed. He fixed the speaker with a terrible eye. "Get up on yore feet when yuh address this court, Bass Marlowe!" he ordered. "And cease yore blasphemous talk while yuh stand so close to the brink of eternity. Every man in this great and glorious country has the right to defend hisself and to be heard. I'm givin' yuh that privilege now, and if yuh got anything to say, yuh'll be heard in all fair-

ness. This is an unprejudiced court."

"Yeah!" sneered Marlowe, glancing toward Harper. As the sheriff straightened erect and unfolded his arms, the huge outlaw rose sullenly to his feet. "Yeah, like hell. We ain't even got no lawyer. The Territory of Montana ain't hardly a state yet. This trial ain't even legal. If yuh find us guilty of stealin'—which we ain't—yuh ain't got no jail to put us in. Me and the boys hasn't got—"

"If yuh don't git a hangin' sentence, the Stock Growers' Union'll build a jail!" shouted Frank Jackson hotly. "Yuh're a liar, Marlowe! We caught yuh red-handed rustlin' cattle, and I put five witnesses up to testify to it, but if yuh got anything to say besides cuss words, spit it out!"

There was an interruption. A man stood up in the courtroom. It was Bill Elwood.

"If it please the court," he called out, "there is some justice in what the prisoner says. If he wants somebody to defend him and his friends, I'll take the job."

Frank Jackson whirled and stared livid hatred at the sheepman who dared to make such an offer.

"Yuh're a fool, Bill Elwood!" he cried hotly. "These sidewinders are on trial for stealin' cattle right now, but they'd as leave rustle yore damn sheep as not. Sit down!"

Elwood ignored the fiery rancher. Bass Marlowe looked on with indifference, but a queer smile lightened the sullenness of his face. That this offer by the sheep raiser was the result of the quarrel of the night before was obvious to everybody. Even the four prisoners knew of the fracas.

Ted Harper's face became as immobile as a death mask as he listened. Members of the jury began shouting advice to the judge. Spectators shouted encouragement to defendants and plaintiff alike. It sounded as if Judge Tankard was building a house, the way his gavel began pounding.

"Order! Order!" bawled Clerk Weaver. "Or His Honor will have the court cleared!"

"Set down, feller." Bass Marlowe waved at Elwood. "Can't yuh see there ain't no chance? Hell, I'll talk for myself. Shore, we lifted them cattle. They wasn't no brand on 'em, and this is free range. We needed meat, and free meat has always been a custom. Nobody ever got arrested for killin' deer and buffalo or sometimes a steer before. How was I to know—"

"Hell's bells," bawled Jackson, "yuh was drivin' off twenty head of prime shorthorn stock on the hoof!"

"Yuh're outa order, Mr. Jackson!" roared the judge. "Let the defendant speak. You can address the jury later. Proceed, Bass Marlowe."

"THAT'S all," said the prisoner sullenly. "If it's a crime to git hungry, we're guilty. What that old longhorn is bellerin' about now, I don't savvy. He got his cattle back without a shot bein' fired. Nobody was hurt. But now he wants to hang us like hoss thieves. So take us out and git it over with. Leastways, we'll die with our boots off."

There was a roar of laughter at this pertinent remark. Several spectators cheered the outlaws. Bootleg Bass turned and grinned at his supporters. Somehow he did not have the mien of a condemned man.

Bill Elwood shrugged and, about to reseat himself, met the baleful glare of the fiery old cattleman. A look of undying enmity passed between them. Sheriff Jackson pulled forth his gold watch and glanced at it as Judge Tankard rapped for the prosecutor's attention.

"Finish yore remarks to the jury, Brother Jackson," he said.

Moss Tiernan, of the Boxed M, foreman of the jury, was in whispered conference with his fellow jurors. He got

up abruptly.

"We don't need no more palaver, Yore Honor," he called out. "The jury has done decided. We find them coyotes guilty as hell!"

CHAPTER IV

The Rescue

BEFORE the crowd could renew the uproar there sounded a fusillade of shots all round the Tomahawk, punctuated by wild yells. As though at a signal, from several points in the crowded hall men leaped to their feet, six-shooters in hand, and began forcing their way toward the judge and jury.

Like magic a man with a rifle appeared at every window. There was a surge of the crowd near the door, and a wedge of hard-faced men pushed in and deployed across the rear end of the courtroom. At the same instant the back door crashed open, and three masked men came running in. Two of them halted one on each side of the opening, sawed-off Winchesters menacing the jury.

The leader of this masked trio sprang upon the platform and leaped like a tiger at the back of the angrily rising judge. With one vicious blow he brought the barrel of his gun down on the jurist's unprotected head. The blow sounded in a gruesome *thwack*. Tankard shuddered throughout his length, groaned, and toppled sideward to the floor, overturning his chair as he fell.

As one man the twelve armed jurors arose, six-shooters flashing. The result was terrible. Rifles cracked mercilessly, six-shooters roared—and three jurors went down, their guns tumbling in a heap on the floor at the feet of Andy Jackson as he flung himself forward—only to have his gun shot out of his hand, as he, too, went down.

Frank Jackson crouched in the cleared space before the dais as his hand streaked for his gun. Just as he brought up the weapon to shoot the strange hellion who had so brutally chopped down the judge, a rifle cracked from the nearest window. The fiery little cattleman jerked erect and pitched headlong to the floor, a .30-30 bullet hole ventilating his chest.

That settled things definitely. Sheriff Harper, after a swift look around, did not stir from his position against the wall by the prisoners' bench. His face as blank as that of an Indian, he remained as rigid as a statue.

"Freeze!" shouted the tall man on the platform, standing astride the fallen Tankard. "All you rattlers drop yore fangs if yuh don't wanna die, and be damn' quick about it. This court is still in session—and Judge Colt is presidin'!"

The stricken jurors, the shouting and screaming spectators, having been disarmed by Judge Tankard, caught like rats in a trap, were helpless. Under the protection of the riflemen at the windows, the half dozen armed desperadoes who had been in the courtroom advanced in a businesslike body to gather up the guns of the jury, callously tramping around the body of the fallen prosecutor. Only one of their number had dropped under the guns of the jury.

"Sit down, everybody!" directed the man on the platform, swinging his guns in arcs that spoke of easy practice, and hinted at sudden death. "All right, Marlowe, git movin'. Boots and hosses outside the back door for all four of yuh."

Slowly the uproar subsided as the crowd obeyed. Only young Andy Jackson and Sheriff Harper remained standing. The young cattleman, his

Hank's second bullet went over the falling Ackley's head and entered Tarp's chest (Chap. XIII)

eyes staring darkly like burned holes in a white blanket, stood gazing in impotent horror upon the body of his father, watching the lifeblood slowly spreading out, twin pools of bright red death, on each side of the old man's body.

THE four rescued outlaws padded brisky out the back door between the two armed guards, followed by the men who had garnered in the weapons of the jury.

The leader of the raiders, his guns still describing smooth arcs, surveyed the courtroom mockingly from behind the judge's table. He was cruelly arrogant, his unspoken taunts striking out like a cold but withering flame. Tall and lithe and merciless, he wore a cream-colored Stetson, a buckskin shirt, and slick black chaps. His lean body was set in cruel lines. His dark eyes blazed behind his obscuring mask. His hair was all but invisible beneath his hat.

Those basilisk eyes of his singled out the black-clad figure of Sheriff Harper, and a thin but unseen smile parted his handsome lips.

"Listen, you!" he said, and his rich baritone voice carried distinctly to every corner of the house, a silken timbre that made more than one listener shudder. "We don't aim for Montana free range to be polluted by tinhorn gamblers wearin' sheriff stars and sellin' likker. So this is a warnin'. Don't even think of stickin' yore nose outside of Elkhorn—or yuh'll find yoreself shufflin' cards and peddlin' whiskey in hell. Savvy?"

Sheriff Harper made no answer. None was expected.

"Let's go, boys," said the disciple of Judge Colt, and the remaining raiders backed swiftly out of the place.

Only the eight grim riflemen remained at the windows. There sounded the bustle of mounting and then they, too, disappeared. The thunder of hoofs receded like a shock and a bad dream.

"Git guns and make after 'em!" bellowed Moss Tiernan.

There was a rush for the doors. But by the time the dazed crowd reached the street there was only a cloud of dust rolling rapidly toward the Eastern horizon. Only Andy Jackson who had merely been slightly creased and was now on his feet again, and Sheriff Harper remained in the wrecked courtroom.

The sheriff went methodically about examining the bodies. Young Jackson ran to his father.

"Dad! Dad!" he cried, tears misting his eyes as he rolled the body of the old man over and began opening his shirt. "How bad are yuh hit?"

Frank Jackson's head rolled grotesquely. His eyelids fluttered.

"No use, son," he whispered. "They got me."

"No!" cried the young man, in sharp anguish. "Yuh can't die! I'll get yuh to Doc Beckley."

Moss Tiernan and Bill Elwood came back into the Tomahawk through opposite doors. The cowman hurried to his old friend's side and pulled a whiskey flask from his pocket. Propping up the wounded man, he succeeded in getting a couple of swallows down his throat. The sheep raiser stood above them, looking down with eyes as bleak as a stormy sea.

The dying man saw him, and his fading eyes sharpened momentarily in hatred.

"Damn yuh, Bill Elwood!" he gasped. "This was yore doin's. If I could pull a trigger—I'd take yuh with me."

"How bad is he shot?" the sheepman asked Tiernan, ignoring the bitter words.

"Fatal," gritted Tiernan without looking up. "Better travel, Elwood"

THE sheepman opened his thin lips to speak again, thought better of it, shrugged, and went over to where the sheriff knelt beside Sam Tankard.

"How about a posse to chase them hellions, Harper?" he asked in a low voice. "I'll go along."

Harper looked at him peculiarly.

"There was at least twenty of 'em, not countin' Marlowe and his pardners," he replied, in a voice that only they two could hear. "Nothin' we can do right now but see after these men. Better get the sheepmen together and get outa town till things quiet down. That dead feller beyond Jackson was a sheepherder from over Powder River country."

A long look passed between the two, and Elwood walked out without another word.

"Send Dr. Beckley and the undertaker here," Harper called after him.

Andy Jackson had attempted to staunch his father's wounds with a pair of bandanas.

"I'll get them, Dad!" he said between clenched teeth. "I'll recog-

nize some of 'em when I see 'em again."

"No!" gasped the old man, his eyes anxious. "The leader — did yuh see him?"

"I'll know him, Frank," promised Tiernan. "In spite of his mask."

"I already know him," murmured the dying man. "Name's Merl Shaw —'Gunbarrel' Shaw, they called him in Oklahomy, years ago. Has a ridge on the underside of his gun barrels. Likes to pistol-whip men, but he can shoot like a marksman, too. I recognized his style."

"The killer outlaw?" exclaimed his son. "Dad, I swear I'll get him for yuh! I—"

"No, son," whispered the old man. "Listen to me. The Tumblin' J is yores now. But yuh'll have more hell holdin' on to it than I had buildin' the spread. Gunbarrel Shaw wouldn't of come here with his gang to save four coyotes for nothin'. There's lots more back of this. It's a fight against our cattle union. The sheepmen has hired them outlaw gunfighters against us. Yuh mustn't try nothin' by yoreself. Ride like hell to Thad Kemp. He helped us organize, and he's the man to take charge now. With a big cattle spread of his own, and him a big political power in Montana, he's the cattlemen's friend. He'll know what to do."

Judge Tankard, the blood streaming down the back of his neck from a terrible gash in his head, got dizzily to his feet with the aid of the sheriff and staggered down from the platform to the side of the dying cattleman. Tiernan quickly offered his bottle, and the gunsmith jurist drank gratefully.

"Hear me, Andy," whispered Frank Jackson fiercely, clutching feebly at his son's strong hand. "I ain't got time to argue, and I want yuh to live, not die. The Cattle Growers' Union has got to stand up. Promise me yuh'll get word to Thad Kemp and foller his advice."

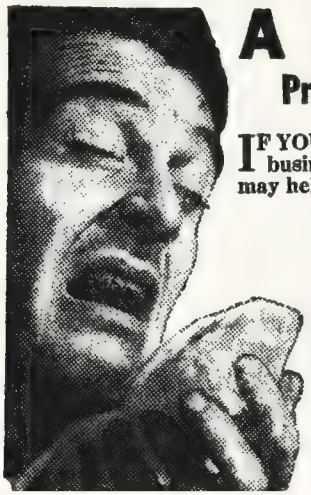
"I will," Andy promised harshly. "I'll notify him, but if them damned woollies want a range war, I'll accommodate 'em."

"I reckon they do," said Tiernan bitterly. "Yuh seen Elwood stand up for them rustlers, didn't yuh?"

Young Andy Jackson's face went grim with ugly promise, settling in lines of granite resolve which made him look older and harder. His father caught sight of the bloody judge, and struggled to speak on.

"So that hellion didn't git yuh, Sam?" he mumbled. "Stand by my

[*Turn Page*]



A HEALTH WARNING!

Printed in the interest of public well-being!

IF YOU'RE nursing a cold—*see a doctor!* Curing a cold is the doctor's business. But there are certain precautions which, if taken in time, may help you to ward off a cold.

For instance, your own doctor will tell you that when your body resistance is high, you are not apt to "take cold so easily." And he'll also tell you that "keeping regular" is a great aid in maintaining a higher resistance.

So, keep your bowels open! And when a laxative is needed, use Ex-Lax! Ex-Lax is mild and gentle, yet thor- tastes like delicious chocolate.

For more than 30 years, Ex-Lax has been America's favorite family laxative. It's as good for children as it is for grown-ups. At all druggists in 10¢ and 25¢ sizes. Get a box of Ex-Lax today!

When Nature forgets—remember

EX-LAX

boy, will yuh? Get help—quick! Don't let—"

He broke off, tried to tighten his grip on his son's hand, and slid helplessly into eternity.

THE young man tensed and then sobbed aloud as Tiernan gently lay the dead man back on the floor. Sheriff Harper broke the ghastly silence.

"Alcott and Rigney here have a good chance to pull out of it. Sam, yuh'll part yore hair on the other side from now on. Jim Heath is done for, and so is that raider feller yonder. Hmm—three jurymen to one raider."

"Know who he was, Harper?" asked Tiernan.

"I can't say for shore," answered the sheriff, in level tones.

"I can," grunted the owner of the Boxed M. "He was a shepherd from Powder River!"

"That's a dangerous remark, Tiernan," warned the sheriff.

The old cattleman laughed harshly as he looked down at the body of his friend. Then he fixed shrewd eyes on the sheriff.

"'Pears to me, Harper, yuh took things mighty meek in general durin' the ruckus. I don't remember seein' yuh pull yore guns."

"Don't make matters worse than they are, Tiernan," advised the sheriff in a flat voice. "I didn't do anything because none of us had a chance."

"Sensible," grunted the judge.

Young Jackson got to his feet. He raised wet eyes toward the rafters of the Tomahawk, and his lips moved.

"I'm carryin' on, Dad," he murmured. "I'll get Bill Elwood for this—and that's a promise."

"Tiernan," ordered the judge, "better ride up to the T K and tell Kemp about this mess. If he ain't home, send a messenger to Butte by stage. He can ride up to Helena from there. Andy, lad, we'd better see about a Christian burial for yore dad first off."

Andy Jackson brought his stony gaze to bear on the sheriff.

"I don't know whether yuh're a coward or not, Harper," he said in bleak tones. "I don't know whether yuh're honest or not. But I'm passin' yuh the same warnin' Gunbarrel Shaw gave yuh—don't get in my way out on the range."

He turned on his heel and started out.

"Hey!" yelled the judge. "Where are yuh goin', lad?"

"To set fire to hell!" said Jackson, over his shoulder.

That was the reason Judge Tankard, after Dr. Beckley had sewed up his head, went to the hotel and composed an urgent letter to the Cattlemen's Protective Association in the name of the local stock raisers' union. And he included a personal letter which he signed himself and which was instrumental in bringing Steve Reese and his aides as fast as horses could travel.

CHAPTER V

At Death Grips

QUIETLY they sat their mounts there on the trail, the white-haired old Senator Kemp backed by two of his riders—Tarp and Ackley. Andy Jackson, backed by a dozen cowhands, sat facing them.

"I been wantin' to see you, Mr. Kemp," said young Jackson hotly. "It's been a week now since Dad was killed while he was tryin' to act accordin' to law like yuh said. Moss Tiernan and I both been to see yuh, and yuh ain't done a damn thing except straddle the fence. As one of the

organizers of our stock raisers' union, yuh had oughta be doin' somethin'. Dad thought yuh was the right man to handle things, but I think yuh're jest a four-flushin' politician!"

"Now, Andy, lad, that ain't no way to talk to me," reproved the owner of the T K ranch. "Yore daddy was right. I'm gonna take a hand, but it ain't doin' no good for yuh to ride around the country like yuh been doin' all week."

"It shore's hell ain't!" agreed Jackson bitterly. "And I ain't wastin' no more time lookin' for an outlaw band. My dad ain't sleepin' well in his grave. I promised him I'd come to you first, and I also promised him I'd get the sheepmen responsible for his killin'. I've give yuh a week. Now I'm takin' over the job myownself."

"Andy, Andy!" cried Senator Kemp in genuine dismay and anxiety. "Listen to me, lad. I'm goin' to bring the Marlowe gang to justice. I'm goin' to see—"

Jackson cut him off with a contemptuous laugh.

"Do what yuh dang please," he said bluntly, "but I ain't waitin' on it. C'mon, boys, let's ride over to the Boxed M."

Whirling their mounts, the Tumbling J riders galloped away in a cloud of dust. Thaddeus Kemp stared after them with narrowed eyes, an apprehensive look on his fattish face. His two riders crowded up to him.

"Shall we get the other men and teach that smart-aleck not to talk thataway to a senator, Boss?" demanded Ackley.

"No." Kemp shook his massive head. "We have to overlook Andy Jackson's actions these days. He's on the prod. Let's ride and tend to our business on Baldy Ridge."

The senator was plenty right. Andy Jackson was hot enough to boil. Young, impetuous, rightly upset over the killing of his father, he was intolerant of the slow-moving senator. He wanted revenge, and he wanted it now.

Bill Elwood

On the Boxed M spread, the young ranchman found old Moss Tiernan about of the same mind as himself.

"Think of that old windbag," Jackson said angrily. "Not five miles from where I met him on the trail was more'n thirty of his steers rottin' away, and he's scared to say or do anything against the woollies for fear he'll lose a few votes. To hell with politics!"

"Right," agreed Tiernan bitterly. "I lost ten head in that slaughter myself. Wait'll we saddle up, and me and some of the boys'll go to town with yuh."

In a few minutes a grim-looking cavalcade set forth, twenty riders armed to the teeth with six-guns, rifles and plenty of ammunition. They jingled into Elkhorn long before noon and stopped at the Three Fingers Saloon.

"Belly up, men," invited Jackson. "It's on the Tumblin' J." And to the barkeep: "Set out yore best, Finch. Where's Ted Harper? I wanna see him."

"DIDN'T yuh meet him on the stage trail?" asked the barman in surprise. "He rode out thataway on his way to see Senator Kemp."

"We didn't come thataway," said Jackson. "Reckon that's how we missed him. Goin' to see Kemp, huh? Hell! He's goin' to spark Elsie."

"Well," said Moss Tiernan curtly, "nobody can say we didn't try to make a legal posse."

"Huh?" exclaimed the bartender, his eyes widening in apprehension. "What's goin' on?"

"Plenty!" snapped Jackson. "Seen Bill Elwood around?"

"N-no, not since yestiddy."

"Seen any dirty sheepherders?" asked Tiernan.

The bartender shook his head.

"Set out another bottle," ordered the Boxed M rancher. "Drink hearty, boys. She's gonna be hot, dry work."

"I wouldn't advise you men to ride out east of town," said the barkeep anxiously. "Leastways, not the way yuh're feelin' this mornin'."

"And why not?" demanded Andy Jackson truculently.

"Bunch of sheepmen over that way," said Finch. "They found another poisoned water-hole somewheres and claim it killed two or three hundred woollies."

"That's a lie!" roared a Tumbling J rider. "It's jest made up to throw suspicion on the cattlemen."

"Yuh're right, Dawson." His employer nodded, his face growing hard.

"I think it's jest a cover for shootin' them fifty or sixty steers we found the other day, Andy," said Cluett, another Tumbling J man, a fellow with a v-shaped scar on his temple.

"We'll go see," said Moss Tiernan. "Ready to ride, Andy?"

"Yeah," Young Jackson spun a twenty-dollar gold piece across the bar. "Take out for all of it, Finch," he said over Tiernan's protests.

Then he turned to survey the line of hard-eyed cowboys along the bar.

"We're ridin' deliberate into sheep territory, men," he said tersely. "You know what for, but yuh heard what the barkeep said about a gatherin' of mutton eaters over east of here. Anybody wanna back out?"

"Hell, no!" came the chorus. "Let's ride. We ain't forgettin' Frank Jackson."

Andy Jackson swelled with pride. His face, drawn from a week's grief and constant strain of riding in search of the outlaws he could not find, told of the suffering he had undergone.

"You, Cluett," he said. "You stay here in town and get up them supplies for the ranch. Take the stuff out by the west-bound stage. The wagon'll be down at the trail to meet yuh."

"Aw, Andy," objected the man. "I can do that later. Lemme go along and see the fun. Yuh need every man—"

"The ranch needs supplies, too. That's yore job. The rest of yuh come on."

Cluett exchanged a significant look with Dawson, then shrugged in resignation. He stayed at the bar, drinking, as his companions roared out of the saloon and eagerly forked their broncs.

Out of town along the eastern trail poured the vengeful cattlemen. With each mile that they penetrated into what was definitely woollie grazing land, they became more bitter, more eager to come to grips with their enemies instead of chasing the elusive Bootleg Bass Marlowe, who was small potatoes anyhow.

ABOUT five miles along the road to Lamar they came upon a group of some fifteen or sixteen sheep ranchers and herders. All of the men were well armed. They were gathered not far from the spread of a small sheepman just south of the stage line trail. One man was haranguing them forcefully as the cattlemen rode up.

"Them damn range hogs has poi-

soned my last water-hole," he was saying hotly. "I lost nearly three hundred sheep before I knowed it. All of you men has suffered at their hands, and they keep bringin' in more and more cattle to crowd us off the range. How much longer are we gonna stand for it?"

"No longer, Hummel!" yelled a stormy-eyed spokesman for the herders. "Let's start wipin' 'em out before they get too many for us."

"Men! Men!" cried Bill Elwood, as he held up his hand for silence. "Hummel is entitled to justice, and I'm the first one to back him up, but we can't jest ride headlong into war with the cattle hogs. We must get ready. Mebbe—"

"Yuh're damned right yuh can't!" yelled Andy Jackson, as he led his cowmen forward. "We'll do the ridin' for yuh."

"Young Jackson!" exclaimed Elwood, his lean face going even more gaunt and grim. "Yuh plumb crazy, boy? Yuh had no business comin' over here."

The sheepmen turned on the cattlemen with angry shouts. Guns were drawn on both sides as the two factions fell away and faced each other. Jackson, backed by the rangy Moss Tiernan, pushed forward until he confronted the leader of the sheepmen. At such proximity to his sworn enemy, the young man's face clouded, and a vein began to throb at his temple with congested blood.

"Yuh're the crazy one, Elwood!" he grated. "Moreover, anything yuh're sayin' against cattlemen is a damn lie! It's yore dirty breed that's slaughterin' our cattle and hirin' outlaws to shoot us down from behind—and outside windows—because yuh're too yeller to face us like men!"

The sheepman's face went deadly white, but Elwood had learned and suffered for better than forty years in the hard school of life, where he had majored in experience. He didn't lose his head now, although it was obvious that his rage was mounting to the danger point.

"Jackson," he said, and his voice was so thick that men in the background had to strain their ears to hear, "yuh're a young hot-head, and yuh have jest lost yore daddy—so I'll overlook yore insults this time. But I'm tellin' yuh quick that if yuh don't want to die right here in yore boots, yuh better fork yore cayuses and get the hell outa here."

Mingled threats, growled anger, and sneers ran through the ranks of tense men, men who were awaiting now the signal from the two leaders. The sun was shining brightly overhead. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the tall sycamores beyond them. To the east, where the stage line trail rose to pass between the rocky walls of a little gap, the sunlight glinted on metal. The stage from Lamar was approaching, but here beside the trail men stared into the leering face of bloody violence and cared nothing for the rest of the universe.

Andy Jackson drew a long, quivering breath. Then, unable to contain himself any longer, he leaped forward and struck the sheepman full in the face. The blow sounded like the *chop* of an ax. Elwood staggered back as blood spurted from his nose. Then hellish fury was born in his face.

He shook his head to clear it, and his hand dropped to his gun. The touch of the weapon sobered him instantly.

"No!" he cried. "No! By Gawd, I'll break yuh in two with my bare hands!"

JACKSON had started to match the draw. Now, an expression of angry surprise on his flushed features, he clenched his fists and met the charge. It was like two wild bulls of the plains crashing together. And

it was too much for the restive watchers. With angry yells the two factions surged forward, fists and guns swinging.

In a moment berserk men swung and kicked and bit and gouged and scratched as they grappled and stag-

Howard Thorpe

gered about or rolled on the ground in the fury of their passion. Locked in a terrible embrace, the two leaders gripped each other with one hand while they swung their right fists in mighty blows. Neither thought of parrying the terrific jolts dealt by the other, seeking rather to glory in taking the punishment while each sought to hammer his antagonist down to the dust.

What the outcome of the fist fight would have been cannot be guessed, because suddenly somebody used his six-shooter. At the report, as though it were a signal, other guns began roaring. The brawl turned into a massacre. Nobody knew who fired that first shot, but the results were ghastly.

One sheepman got up with three bullet holes through his body and ran screaming, the blood pouring from him, to crash into a tree before he fell to the ground senseless, to bleed to death. A Boxed M rider staggered to his feet with his lower jaw shot away. Blindly he stood there, feet spread wide apart and triggering his guns erratically at everything, no longer cognizant of friend or foe, until his guns and his blood vessels were empty. Then he lurched forward and fell on his ruin of a face, never to move again.

Shot through the thigh and the left shoulder, fierce old Moss Tiernan triggered his six-shooter at three sheepmen who were clubbing and pistoling a pair of Tumbling J cowboys to death. Hummel, the man who had lost the several hundred head of sheep, shot in the groin, was dragging himself painfully across the ground, clawing his way toward a Winchester rifle.

Horses were plunging and shrilling in terror. Gunsmoke made a death haze in the atmosphere, the reek of burned powder stung the nostrils. And through it all, unmindful of the carnage about them, Elwood and Jackson reeled about, slugging each other mercilessly.

Human flesh could stand only so much. The sheep contingent broke first, and ran for their lives. Of fifteen men, only seven managed to get to their horses, leap into saddle, and flee northward across the stagecoach trail, seeking sanctuary in the hills.

Of nineteen cattlemen, only ten arose from the ground to send shots after the vanquished. Not a single

man was unscathed. And as the survivors, their rage still unabated, staggered after any available horse to mount and pursue the sheepmen, the stagecoach rumbled onto the scene and came to a screeching, rattling stop in a billow of dust.

Out of the coach, reckless of flying lead, leaped Steve Reese. In the character of a geologist, clad in a suit of Scottish tweeds with a Norfolk jacket, he looked wholly incongruous as he raced straight into the meleé.

But his face was no longer that of a mild, tenderfoot mining engineer. With the reflection of stark tragedy imprinted on his features, his black eyes flashing like Stygian pools of hells lit by internal lambent flames, he charged the mad group. Behind him, coming on a bit uncertainly, were the stagecoach's two armed guards.

REESE leaped forward at a burly individual who was just throwing down on the crawling Hummel who had finally succeeded in reaching the rifle. Grabbing the cowman's gun hand at the wrist, the cattle association man wasted no time in fruitless parley. He brought up his balled fist in a terrible short jab that lifted the berserk cowboy to his toes. As the fellow groaned and sagged backward, Reese tore the gun from his relaxing fist and turned in time to slam it against the head of a raging puncher coming to aid his slugged companion.

"Stop!" he shouted. "All of you madmen! Quit this slaughter before you are all dead men!"

He whirled and dived at Hummel's grim, bloody figure just in time to prevent the badly wounded sheepman from shooting Moss Tiernan in the back. Tearing the weapon away from the man, Reese leaped into the duel still raging between Andy Jackson and Bill Elwood.

Unmindful of blows or possible bullets, he grasped each bloody wreck of a man by the collar and exerted his magnificent strength to separate them. Had they not already been nearly spent even he might have failed. As it was, the muscles stood out against his coat sleeves like the sinews of a Greek wrestler. Slowly at first, and then with a rush, the two gory combatants came apart.

Before they could turn on him with a common purpose, he tried to shake some sense into them.

"Stop this, you fools!" he commanded fiercely. "Can't you see what you've done? Half your men are dead. Here, you!" He swung to Moss Tiernan. "You look like you've some intelligence left. Help me! You guards! Halt those crazy men. God help me, I don't know which is which. They look like cattlemen. Call them back here."

He turned his attention back to the two men he still gripped by the collar. His penetrating eyes searched their battered faces swiftly. In spite of their bloody condition he figured them out.

"You must be Andy Jackson," he snapped at the Tumbling J owner. "Call off your men. You've won this fight. Stop them—quick!"

He released Jackson and gave him a shove which sent him reeling into the arms of Moss Tiernan. Both of them went to the ground. Reese gripped both arms of the older man whom he had stopped fighting, and met his wild gaze with his almost hypnotic black eyes.

"You must be Bill Elwood," he said.

The light of sanity was returning to the sheepman's eyes.

"Yes," he panted, still breathless.

"Then grab a horse and get away from here. Put the stage between you and these men. Vamose! You can talk later."

Without a word, Elwood obeyed. As he mounted the horse one of the coach guards had captured and

brought forward, not a man offered to stop him, so dominant was Reese.

Whether Elwood would have lived to get out of range, without a further distraction, cannot be said. But as he rode away, circling the stagecoach, his bloody appearance and torn clothing brought a scream in a woman's voice.

The door of the coach being open as Reese had left it, a feminine figure in a fetching suit with a short jacket and puffed sleeves, and a ridiculous little hat trimmed with a bird's wing, fell fainting to the ground.

"Hell's bells!" Andy Jackson muttered hoarsely. "A—a woman!"

"Yes," Reese said savagely. "A lady! And you give her the reception of Sioux Indians."

CHAPTER VI

The Simmering Caldron

JUST the appearance of the girl lying there between the wheels of the stagecoach, in imminent danger of being crushed because of the movements of the restless team, completed what Reese had begun. Two of the lesser injured cowboys hurried forward to pick her up. And the wave of insanity was over.

Bill Elwood disappeared in the distance in the wake of his surviving fellow sheepmen. Andy Jackson, sick and weak, but unwounded, set about reorganizing his men and seeing after the dead and injured. With the help of the guards and male passengers, Reese began applying emergency dressings to wounds.

Hendricks, the stage driver, rode over to Hummel's place and commandeered a pair of wagons to haul the badly hurt survivors of the fight to town. Of the seventeen men shot down that morning only seven reached the ministrations of Dr. Beckley. The undertaker sent out for the others that afternoon.

Having done all he could for the time being, and not wishing to attract too much attention to himself, Reese gradually slipped back into his character as a geologist. As the dazed Jackson recovered his wits and took charge, Reese withdrew to the stagecoach to see about the sole woman passenger.

Promising to send aid from town as soon as he got there, the driver once more got his coach under way.

It rumbled into Elkhorn ahead of news of the tragedy, and rolled into the coachyard opposite the Stag Hotel. While hostlers hurried to change horses, and the guards threw down mail sacks and luggage from the rack on the roof of the stage, other workers attended to the unloading of the heavy pieces from the boot. Dispatching one of the guards to seek the doctor and undertaker, the driver reported to the man standing at the door of the coach office.

This man listened to the report of the fight with eager interest. He nodded in commendation of what had been done by the employees of the stage line and by the passengers. Then his eyes lighted on Reese and the young woman making their way to the hotel. He laid swift fingers on the driver's arm.

"Who's the woman?" he asked.

"Oh, that's Miss Alice Harper—from Ioway. She's come out here to jine her brother. Right pert filly, ain't she?"

"Her brother? Do yuh mean Ted Harper?"

"Reckon so. She said he was sheriff here, Mr. Thorpe."

Howard Thorpe, owner of the hotel and stage line, raised his eyebrows. He was a tall but solidly built man in his late thirties, with rather lean features and a neatly trimmed mustache. There

The heavy bucket crashed down on White Cloud's neck between the head and shoulder, slamming him, senseless, to the ground (Chap. XIV)

wasn't a gray hair in his chestnut thatch, and his dark brown eyes were sharp and alert. Clad in tan corduroy and short riding boots, he was a very personable man.

There was about him an air of conscious power, of driving ability. Gifted with unusual business acumen, Thorpe had come to Elkhorn from Denver several years previous and, seeing the future of Montana, had built the hotel and the Tomahawk dancehall. Then, as people began trickling westward in increasing numbers from the railhead at Lamar, he had conceived the idea of establishing a stage line from there all the way to Idaho.

Every cent of his capital had gone into this, the biggest venture of his life. Already the stage line reached halfway across Montana to Butte. A typical go-getter of the newly awakened West,

Thorpe held a mail and express franchise from Lamar to Butte. The Thorpe Stage Line had become his dominant obsession.

HE gripped the shoulder of his driver.

"Who's the man?" he demanded crisply.

"That's the feller that stopped the fight between Elwood and Jackson. Reese, his name is—some sort of minin' man from St. Louis."

"I see." Thorpe nodded thoughtfully. "Get the mail sacks in for me, Hendricks. I must go over and thank Reese. So Ted Harper has a sister, eh? Must not have been expecting her—ridin' out to see Thad Kemp."

Leaving the stage office, Thorpe made his way to the hotel. He accosted the pair just as they were turning away from the desk. Smiling cordially he removed his hat and bowed.

"My name is Thorpe," he said. "I'm the owner of the stage line. My driver has just told me about the trouble out east of here. While it ain't strictly any of our business—this fightin' between sheep and cattle ranchers—I want to thank yuh for what yuh did in stoppin' the battle, Mr. Reese. Sorry it happened on the trail."

"We didn't get there in time to do much," disclaimed Reese. "It was practically over when we arrived. From what I could gather, it started over the poisoning of several hundred sheep belonging to a man named Hummel."

Thorpe glanced at the girl. "I understand that this young lady is lookin' for Sheriff Harper."

"Yes." Reese nodded. "She is looking for her brother. May I present Miss Alice Harper? We met in Lamar."

"I see," said Thorpe, smiling at the girl's pale face. Then: "May I ask yore business, Reese?"

"Surely. I'm a geologist—with the Phenix Mining Company of St. Louis."

Thorpe's eyes widened. Then he nodded in understanding.

"I see. Yuh're on yore way to Butte."

"On the contrary, I 'm stopping here for the present."

Then Thorpe's attention was claimed by the anxious girl.

"Do you know my brother, Mr. Thorpe?"

"Shore," Thorpe said heartily. "Was he—er—lookin' for yuh today?"

The girl looked uncertain. "Well, I wrote him two weeks ago that I would be on the way unless I heard from him to the contrary. And I sent him a telegram from Deadwood, South Dakota, yesterday."

"Ah!" murmured Thorpe. "That explains it. Yore wire came to Lamar and had to be mailed from there. We have no telegraph service here yet. Mebbe yore message is over in the mail sack right now. Yuh must have come on the same stage."

"I never thought of that," she said, biting her lip. "But it won't make any difference. Where can I find Ted? I'll go to him."

Thorpe hesitated. "Well, yuh see, Miss Harper, Ted ain't in town today. He went over toward Butte the day before yesterday on business. He ain't likely to get back before tomorrow or the day after."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, a bit frightened. "What can I do?"

"Stay right here at the hotel," said Thorpe. "Anything in the house is yores. And I'll tell my drivers to pass the word along the line for yore brother to hurry back, if he hasn't already started."

Briskly taking command, Thorpe ordered the clerk to show her to her room, and sent a swamper out to bring in her traveling bag. The tenderfoot geologist, Steve Reese, bade the girl good-by and started out to see about his own luggage.

"Oh, Reese," said Thorpe, "let's have a drink. I want to talk to yuh."

WILLINGLY Reese went with him into the bar of the Tomahawk.

"About this girl," said Thorpe without preamble. "This ain't no place for her at this time. You saw evidence enough this mornin', but listen—"

Hastily the stage line owner gave him a full account of the trouble between the sheep and cattle owners, and the events leading up to and including the battle in the courtroom.

"I was over in Lamar the day it happened," Thorpe said, "but I got back that evenin' in time to keep the sheep and cattle men from shootin' up the town. Things quieted down in Elkhorn after the funerals, but the whole range is on the verge of goin' up in smoke. Bill Elwood ain't the kind of man to back down or step aside for nobody. And young Jackson has gone crazy mad over the killin' of his dad."

"You stopped the fighting?" said Reese. "What did Harper do?"

"Don't get the wrong idea about Ted Harper," Thorpe said quickly. "He couldn't do much by hisself. I had to call out all the men and guards on the stage line to patrol the town. That's where Harper is now. He went over to Butte to find Senator Thad Kemp and have a talk with him."

"What about the men who shot up the court?"

"Nobody knows," frowned Thorpe. "The rumor is that Frank Jackson recognized the leader as a fellow named Gunbarrel Shaw, outlaw from Oklahoma, but the one feller of the bunch that got killed was a sheepherder from Powder River. That makes it look mighty funny."

"Meaning?"

"Meanin' that Frank Jackson musta been right in suspectin' the sheepmen of bein' behind the trouble. And that means that Elkhorn is gonna be the storm center of a damned bad range war, which makes it a tough place for Easterners and strangers to be."

"You mean Alice Harper ought to go back to Iowa?"

Thorpe shrugged. "That's for Ted Harper to decide. I'm doublin' the guards of the stage line for the time bein'. By the way, jest what is yore business here, Reese?"

"Maybe none, in view of what you've just told me," Reese said a bit ruefully. "I was sent to explore the mining region southwest of Elkhorn, but now I may go on to Butte. What is your advice?"

"Don't set foot outside of Elkhorn except by stage," the stage owner answered promptly. "If yuh want to go on to Butte this afternoon I'll go book yore passage right now. Or yuh can go back to Lamar in the eastbound coach tomorrow."

"Thanks, but I wouldn't think of

[*Turn Page*]

running away and leaving Miss Harper here alone."

"Eh?" queried Thorpe in quick surprise. "She anything to you?"

"Only a rather bewildered girl in a savage country, and I promised not to desert her before she contacted her brother."

"Oh!" Thorpe took fresh stock of his companion. "Well, yuh better get yoreself a good gun and learn how to use it. And don't take sides in any arguments, yuh hear."

"Much obliged." Reese nodded. "I must look pretty raw as a tenderfoot."

"Yuh don't look like a Custer scout," Thorpe frankly admitted, and they both laughed. "I have to go now. Any way I can help yuh, jest call on me."

PARTING from the stage owner, Reese strolled along the main street. He was aware that curious glances followed him, but had no difficulty maintaining his air of a newcomer from the East. And it hadn't been so long since he had walked the pavements of the hustling metropolis of St. Louis.

Saying he hailed from St. Louis would not be questioned. He was thoroughly familiar with the big town which was still the fur trading center for this entire Northwestern territory. The Phenix Mining Company was an actual corporation, and during his career he had acquired a smattering of geology among other things. His only danger lay in the possibility of meeting somebody who had run into him in Texas, or a chance acquaintance from St. Louis who knew he had resigned from the police force to go to work for the Cattlemen's Protective Association. Both risks he set aside as negligible.

The information supplied him by Howard Thorpe made him grave. Now he understood the armed men on the range he had encountered a couple of nights previous. The matter worried him. Were the sheepmen really responsible for the courtroom tragedy? If so, just how was he going to avert a bloody sheep and cattle war? If not, just how did the notorious Gunbarrel Shaw fit into the scheme of things?

This latter point gave Reese the most concern. He had never seen the outlaw, but knew Shaw's reputation. The bandit was a terrible enemy for any man to have. Son of an eminent lawyer of Dallas, well educated, Merl Shaw had run wild in the hectic days of carpetbaggers, following the Civil War. Killing his first man—a Mexican—at the age of seventeen, he was absolved from all blame by a lax judge who was prejudiced against all Mexicans, when he should have been punished.

Shaw ran away from home and deliberately set out upon his chosen career. The adventurous youth had decided to become king of the desperadoes who abounded in the land. An uncanny marksman, he was lightninglike in his draw and deadly in his accuracy at almost any given six-gun distance. Figuring the quickest way to achieve his purpose was to meet the toughest badmen he could find and shoot it out with them, he headed for Wichita, that Mecca of killers and bad actors.

Gunman after gunman he disposed of, smiling that white-toothed smile and taunting them in that rich voice of his. He developed the "road agent's twirl" to the point that officers of the law stopped having captured men hand over their guns, but chose to step behind all prisoners and draw their holstered guns themselves. Shaw was not the originator of this trick, but he perfected this stunt of offering his guns butt first and then whirling them so swiftly around on the trigger guard that his would-be captor got a bullet instead of the gun.

Gradually his reputation as a killer had covered the West. His favorite sport was to pick a quarrel, then shoot the guns from the hands of his opponent before cruelly beating the hapless victim over the head with his specially heavy gun barrels, pistoling the dazed man to death.

He had dropped out of sight before Reese had come West from St. Louis —only to pop up suddenly here in Montana.

Gunbarrel Shaw, one of the most deadly outlaws the West knew, usually a lone wolf, with the face of a handsome devil, was reputedly heading a gang of men which included sheepherders among its numbers. If true, there was a mystery behind this business which called for the utmost skill in its unraveling.

In the detective's mind four men required immediate investigation— Sam Tankard, Ted Harper, Bill Elwood, and Andy Jackson. Hank Ball was en route now to line up with the cattlemen; to him would fall the task of corralling the hotheaded young Jackson. Dusty Trail had his orders concerning Bill Elwood. And since Harper was not available, Reese decided to begin with Judge Sam Tankard.

CHAPTER VII

On the Trail

GUNS of every description littered the shop of Shoutin' Sam Tankard. In a rack along one wall was a heterogeneous assortment of rifles, shotguns, and carbines, ranging from an old flintlock that had made more than one good Indian, to a high-power .30-30 with telescopic sights. There was even an old Arabian gun with a wooden barrel and ornately chased stock that Tankard had picked up from a pioneer who had brought it from Connecticut.

On the other side of the store was a flat-topped showcase, the interior of which was a pack-rat's nest of pepperboxes, derringers, cap and ball pistols, and single and double action six-shooters of varying makes and designs. Next to this was a wrapping counter with a drawer till beneath it with five keys on the underside which had to be pressed in a certain manner to open the drawer.

In the rear of the house, on either side of the back door, beneath each window, was a workbench with a vise and a clutter of tools. In small boxes made of packing cases new and old gun parts were inextricably mixed.

Picking his way carefully past the litter of odds and ends near the door, Steve Reese made his way into the grease- and metallic-smelling interior. His quick eyes took in the details of the shop from the little hand forge near one of the workbenches to the considerable stock of ammunition in the shelves behind the wrapping counter.

A huge man with a florid face and a two-inch raw scar on the back of his head looked up and then went on with his work of fitting the lock of a gun together.

"Be with yuh in a minute, brother," he boomed in a hearty voice. "Got to get this pesky spring to fit."

"Don't let me interrupt," Reese answered, walking on back. "I know how it is when you're in the middle of a delicate job. You're Judge Sam Tankard, I take it."

"Yuh take it right," grunted the gunsmith without looking up again.

For a moment there was only the faint sounds Tankard made as his thick fingers worked nimbly at his task. Then:

"That model Remington is always hard to fit a new spring in," observed Reese. "It's a good gun, though."

The gunsmith jerked up his head. With a dawning respect he looked at the man in the Scotch tweeds.

"Hummm—you a gunsmith?" he asked.

"No." Reese smiled. "I know a little about weapons, is all."

"A lot," corrected Tankard, sizing his caller up carefully. "A stranger, and a tenderfoot. Knows guns, and got a damn' fine eye. Where yuh hail from, brother?"

"St. Louis."

Abruptly the gunsmith put the gun part down and got to his feet, wiping his hands on his canvas apron. He met the glance of the other, eye to eye. It was a unique experience for both of them. Reese felt the distinct shock of the big man's blazing personality. Shoutin' Sam felt as if he had suddenly been turned inside out and examined like a bug under a magnifying glass.

FOR a moment there was a tense silence as each took stock of the other. Then Tankard demanded bluntly:

"What's yore business with me, stranger?"

"I came in to ask you," said Reese, choosing his words carefully, "to put a new handle in one of my chipping hammers. I'm a geologist."

"Well? Where's the hammer?"

"I don't think I'll require that subterfuge," said Reese. "As far as the rest of Elkhorn is concerned that's the way it stays. As far as you are concerned, Judge Tankard, I'm about to change my mind."

"That's your privilege."

"Yes. Are you alone here?"

"Right now. Tom Suggs has gone to dinner. Why?"

"First, I think I'd like to buy you a drink, sir."

"Ah!" said Shoutin' Sam. "Now yuh've said somethin'. What's yore name?"

"Steve Reese."

"Let's go, Reese," Tankard said promptly. "Over to the Three Fingers."

They did, and ten minutes later were back in the gun shop.

"Did you get over that wallop on the head all right?" Reese asked.

With two substantial jolts under his belt the judge was mellowing and waxing expansive. Now his florid face became almost choleric. He clenched his huge fist.

"As Jehovah smote wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah," he boomed, "so shall I stomp that sidewinder into the dust! When I catch him."

"I'm afraid not, Judge," said Reese soberly. "Do you know who the man was?"

"Ted Harper told me it was a coyote by the name of Shaw."

"Gunbarrel Shaw," Reese nodded. "Had you ever heard of him before?"

"Shore!" snorted Tankard. "Jest another rattlesnake to be weeded out of the Lord's vineyard. Hit me from behind and bust up my court, will he? Judge Colt, he said. Judge Colt, huh! Gunbarrel Shaw come smack dab to gun headquarters when he came to Elkhorn. I'll Judge Colt him. I'll show him the gun trail to glory! What the hell did yuh wanna see me about?"

Smiling a trifle, Reese took a wallet from his pocket and drew forth a folded sheet of paper. He extended it to the angry gunsmith.

"Did you write that letter, Sam Tankard?" he asked.

Shoutin' Sam stared. It was the letter he had enclosed in the appeal to the Cattlemen's Protective Association.

"So!" he breathed. And, again: "So!"

"So," Reese agreed. "I'm laying my

Still in his deadly crouch, Roberts fired, his bullet striking Andy Jackson in the left forearm (Chap. XX)

cards on the table face up to you, Judge Tankard. I'm here in answer to your call. I'm taking you into my confidence because already I see that I need a friend in Elkhorn, a man I can trust. I think you are that man."

"Yuh never spoke a truer word," replied the gunsmith firmly. "And Elkhorn shore as hell needs you. The range is jest about to blow up. A bloody cattle and sheep war is in the makin', but I know there's more behind it — somethin' I can't understand."

"I have that feeling," Reese said gravely. "My job is with the Cattlemen's Association, and we deal in cattle problems only. However, many times complications arise that cannot be handled on such authority. For that reason, and that only, I hold a special roving commission as a deputy marshal under the jurisdiction of the U. S. Supreme Criminal Court at Fort Smith. This gives me the power to act in any of the states and territories to which I am sent. You are the only man in Montana to whom I've revealed my identity."

"IT'S safe with me."

"I believe that. Who knows that you wrote to the Association?"

"Not a livin' soul. Andy Jackson and Moss Tiernan went to see Thad Kemp, but Andy's hell bent on fightin' it out with the sheepmen on his own. There's been some guerrilla fightin' already. It won't take more'n a match to explode things."

"I found that out," Reese nodded, thinking of his two encounters two nights previously. "We must find out quickly if this Gunbarrel Shaw is still in this country, or if that bloody business in the courtroom was merely a passing incident for him."

"How," asked Tankard curiously, "do yuh know so much about things? How'd yuh know it was Gunbarrel Shaw? I didn't know that when I wrote this letter."

"You'd better destroy this letter, by the way," Reese advised. "I've been talking with Howard Thorpe. He gave all the details to me."

"Howard Thorpe," rumbled Tankard. "It's a blessin' he's in the stagecoach business and not interested in either side."

"Why?"

"He's a man to go the limit without quittin' or backin' down. It's bad enough to have Bill Elwood on one side and Andy Jackson on the other, without havin' Thorpe, too. And if Thad Kemp takes an active hand on the cattle side, there's no tellin' what the wind-up will be."

"It is just such conditions and knowledge of the men hereabouts that you know which will prove most valuable to me, Judge," Reese said firmly. "Keep right on talking."

Nearly an hour later Steve Reese returned to the hotel. The westbound stagecoach was just pulling out. Thorpe and Alice Harper stood at the hotel lobby window watching. They had had dinner together. The girl waved at Reese and held up an envelope.

"Mr. Thorpe was right," she called gaily. "My telegram to Ted was in the mail. I'll hand it to him myself."

"A charming way to receive a telegram, I'm sure," Reese said, smiling.

"So yuh decided to stay in Elkhorn?" Thorpe asked, but it was more of a statement.

"For the present," Reese replied, glancing at the girl.

"We missed you at dinner," said Alice. "Where were you?"

"Strolling around town and meeting some of the people. By the way, Thorpe, I met Judge Tankard. An interesting character."

"Yes, he shore is."

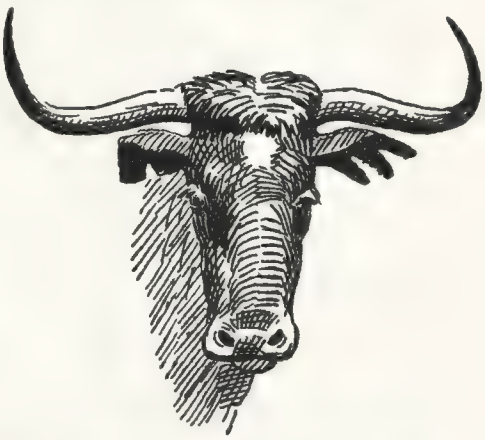
Reese went on upstairs. In the privacy of his room he opened his suitcase, exposing peculiar equipment

for a geologist. The case contained his regular riding gear and his guns.

Removing his coat he put on a shoulder holster, placing in it a long-barreled .38—one of the most accurate guns he owned. From a smaller handbag he selected a few instruments and tools in keeping with his avowed profession. His high-powered rifle and field-glasses he took after a moment's hesitation. Then carefully locking his suitcase and shoving it under the bed, he went downstairs.

BARB WIRE BARRICADES THE OKLAHOMA PLAINS AS DESPERATE MEN ESTABLISH A CATTLE BLOCKADE in

WINCHESTER WAR



A Complete Book-Length Novel Featuring the West's Most Fearless Trio of Cattle Country Avengers —in the Next Issue of RANGE RIDERS

Alice Harper was not in evidence. Thorpe was going across to the coach-yard office. He halted and surveyed Reese in faint surprise.

"GOIN' somewhere?" he asked.

"Just getting ready. Have to get this hammer fixed, hire a guide, and get horses and supplies for a few days' trip into the mountains."

"Doubt if yuh'll find a guide," Thorpe said reflectively. "I warned yuh about conditions, but if yuh're set on goin' out, I can let yuh have a couple of hosses. Or yuh can hire 'em over at the livery stable mebbe. Yuh can get supplies at Keller's general store. Know much about campin' out?"

"Some," Reese smiled. "I've had to rough it at various times."

"Come on," said Thorpe. "I'll take yuh over to Keller and introduce yuh."

"Thanks. Where's Miss Harper?"

"She went to her room. Very fine girl."

"Does she know the business her brother is in, besides being sheriff?" Reese asked.

Thorpe shrugged. "I didn't tell her, if that's what yuh mean. I reckon that's Harper's affair. There's no disgrace in runnin' a saloon. I own the Tomahawk."

They entered the trading store where Thorpe introduced Reese to the

proprietor, a lanky, lantern-jawed individual who asked numerous questions and offered a lot of advice. Having thanked Thorpe for his help and declined the use of his horses, Reese had the garrulous storekeeper fit him out with a small tent, food supplies, a few cooking utensils and a small pick and shovel.

He hired a saddle horse and a pack mule at the stable, rather inexpertly stowed his pack and mounted. Thanking Keller for his advice to avoid trouble with sheep or cattle men and to look out for outlaws and thieving Indians, he set out for the western mountains.

Out of sight of the town, he rode off the trail and stopped to assemble his rifle and put it in the saddle boot. Then he struck out for the hills.

He had no intention of prowling around the mountains and chipping rocks, but for the sake of appearances he was making a stab at it before cutting more northward. His intention was to make a call at the T K ranch and interview Senator Thad Kemp. This action being out of character as a geologist, he proceeded first to lose himself in the hills.

It was beautiful country. The mountains seemed to be set down abruptly on the flat plains of the valleys. The colors were vivid in the clear atmosphere. As he rode along Reese observed distant drifting dots that he knew to be cattle. On one hillslope several patches of gray and white identified themselves as grazing sheep.

Leaving the stagecoach trail which led toward a gap between two towering mountain peaks some twenty miles distant, Reese rode into the rising hills on his left. He met nobody. The afternoon sun blazed down on an illimitable expanse of mountain and plain, peopled only by wild life, range stock and birds.

It was nearly sundown when Reese halted on a high point and dismounted. Taking out his field-glasses, he methodically searched every bit of the country around him, particularly his back trail. He saw nothing except one herd of some thirty steers, an antelope flagging his way across a clearing on the next mountain, and a solitary vulture wheeling dismally above a valley in which was a stand of scrub oaks and young pines.

SATISFIED, Reese put away his glasses and led his two beasts down the watershed in search of a stream of water beside which he could make camp. He had left the sunlight up on the mountain peaks and was wending his way down a narrow ravine in the gathering dusk when, without any warning, his hat tugged to leap free of his head. An instant later he heard the echoing crack of a rifle.

Before the sound came he was already dropping to the ground and rolling for the shelter of a brush thicket. His horse snorted, and the mule bolted across the floor of the ravine, head and tail stretched out for startled flight.

But Reese had no time for the pack animal. There was another crack of the unseen rifle, and a bullet glanced off the boulder at his feet. Cursing himself for his carelessness, Reese searched the opposite side of the ravine for sign of his ambusher.

He almost groaned as he saw the butt of his rifle in its saddle boot on the mildly inquiring horse some twenty feet distant. It might just as well have been twenty miles. Then he saw a wisp of gunsmoke, scarcely distinguishable, curling up from a thicket about thirty yards down the ravine, on the opposite side.

"Ah!" he breathed, drawing his long-barreled six-shooter from its shoulder holster. He removed his hat, made a grimace at the neat bullet hole through the crown, and poked the hat up above the brush top as he leaned

far to the right and thrust his gun barrel out. "Thirty yards, and you missed me with a rifle! You should never shoot at a man's head, fellow. His body makes a better target."

There was a slight disturbance of the drygulcher's shrubbery, and the rifle spoke once more. The bullet cut through the thicket a good two feet lower than Reese's hat and to the right, fanning his cheek in its passage. The other might not be an expert marksman but he knew the old hat trick.

This was his last shot, however. Reese had seen the flash and accurately placed the marksman. Not even flinching from the whining caress of the bullet across his cheek, the Association man leveled out his .38 barrel and pulled the trigger once.

The gun crashed, like the angry bellow of a beleaguered stag replying to the thin baying of a hound. And silence settled down upon the dying echoes like an enfolding blanket. There was a convulsive movement in the rifleman's thicket, but Reese did not stir. He was an old head at this cat and mouse business. He had never played Indian ambush in hilly country, but he had shot rats in the alleys of Kerry Patch.

Not a sound did the drygulcher make, but Reese heard him threshing about. Then, suddenly, the fellow appeared in sight by the simple method of pitching headlong out of his concealment and sliding a few feet downhill. He remained in sight, face down in the dirt, his rifle a full yard from his outflung hands.

Then, and then only, did Reese move. Keeping his gun trained on the man's blue shirt, he got to his feet and hurried across the intervening space. When he reached the side of his murderous assailant he found he had no further need for caution. The man was dead. When he rolled him over on his back, Reese saw that he had been shot squarely through the heart.

CHAPTER VIII

Not Too Dumb

PROBABLY the most puzzling part of the entire matter was the fact that the would-be killer was an utter stranger. Dressed in nondescript range garb, a two-weeks' stubble of beard on his villainous face, an expression of startled dismay and pain about his ugly mouth, the dead bushwhacker was unidentifiable. Reese had never seen him before.

All of his senses alert, the detective scouted in a wide circle for sign. He missed the sharp eyes of Hank Ball and Dusty Trail in this task. Nevertheless, he found the fellow's horse some fifty yards down the ravine, hobbled near a small water-hole in the bed of the gulch, formed by the little stream bubbling down from a spring on the mountainside. There was a diagonal letter J on the animal's left rump, and the beast was still damp with sweat.

"So he wasn't here long," Reese reflected, studying the brand. "A slanting J. Must be the Tumbling J brand of the Jackson spread. Now, is this a stolen horse, or did my sniping acquaintance ride for Andy Jackson? If he did, why would he ambush a harmless geologist? Nobody but Judge Tankard knows any better. And even if this fellow did know, why on earth would a cattleman try to kill an Association man?"

He returned to the body of the dead man and methodically went through the fellow's pockets. Deeply now he

regretted the accuracy of his aim. He would have liked to question this man.

The contents of the pockets proved to be just the odds and ends that any range rider might possess. The only mark on the man himself was a v-shaped scar on his left temple.

Squatting there, Reese swiftly checked off the possibilities.

"He's not a prospector; therefore, he isn't guarding some secret lode or vein up here in the mountains. He couldn't have mistaken me for somebody else; I was too close for that, and the light is still good enough. His horse is still sweaty; and that indicates that he rode here just shortly before I came down the ravine, and deliberately tried to kill me. That means that he must have come from Elkhorn. He trailed me with the intention of slaying me. But who sent him? And why?"

His mind went back over the various faces he had seen in town. He recalled each loafer at the store, at the hotel, at the stable, even at the Three Fingers Saloon, and this man's face was none of them. But a lot of people had seen him leave town. He had studied his own back trail, but he could have missed this trailer. In fact, he must have.

As he had no personal enemies, it followed that his life had been attempted either because he was a detective or a geologist. As it didn't make sense for a cattleman to kill a cattle detective, it meant one of two things: this fellow was not a cattleman, or Reese's life was forfeit because he was a geologist. It still didn't add up, but that was as far as Reese could figure things with the meager facts at hand.

He could settle the first point quickly enough by loading the dead man on his horse and taking him to the Tumbling J for identification. But if he did this, and the fellow proved to have been a Jackson hand, it meant applying the match to the smoldering range war, perhaps losing his own life before he had time to learn whether or not young Jackson was crazy, was up to some deep mischief, or was the victim of an undiscovered plot.

Reese got to his feet with a sigh and rounded up his own two animals. Hobbling the mule, he took his pick and shovel and proceeded to dig a shallow grave. This was a matter that would have to be passed on to Hank Ball for further investigation.

IT was almost dark by the time Reese led his stock down to the water-hole where the unknown killer's mount was cropping the wiry grass. Here he proceeded to make a permanent camp. He pitched his tent and ditched it. Then by the light of a small campfire he built a fireplace of flat rocks and prepared supper.

After a passable meal he built a tree box in a sturdy cedar and stored his provisions safely out of the reach of prowling animals. Then he made a compact roll of grub and the drygulcher's rifle in his blanket and tied it securely to the cantle of his saddle.

This done, he placed the dead man's saddle inside the tent along with his pick, shovel, and other tools, and pegged the tent flap down. Then he lay down with his head on his own saddle and relaxed to smoke and think until moonrise.

When the eastern peaks were kissed with silver, and their jagged outlines were sharply inked against the glow of the sky, he arose and resaddled. Driving the Tumbling J bronc and his packless mule ahead of him, he set out along the ravine. Before the moon set he had reached the stagecoach trail.

Here he turned the surplus stock free, confident that the horse would make its way to the Jackson spread and that the mule would follow.

Turning his mount northward from the trail, he struck out across country in the direction he thought the T K ranch to be. When the moon set he halted and made a dry camp, hobbling his horse.

At daylight he ate a cold meal, watered himself and his horse at the first stream he crossed, and pushed onward. By mid-morning he had to confess to himself that he was lost.

He found plenty of sign that he was in a cattle country, but encountered no riders, no fences, no houses—only drifting herds of scattered cattle. Over toward the northeast somewhere should be the sheep range of Bill Elwood. Southwest should be the Tumbling J spread. Right about here should be the T K, but he couldn't find it. He got close enough to a few whitefaced mollies to decipher the brand. It was the T K mark. But where was the home spread?

About noon he fell in with a couple of line riders, the first men he had seen since his encounter with the drygulcher some twenty miles south. From them he learned that he was on T K range, but about ten miles west of where he had thought he was.

Eyeing his outfit curiously, even suspiciously, they gave him dinner. His story sounded reasonable, however, and they seemed to believe him.

"I couldn't hire a guide in Elkhorn yesterday," he told them, "and I set out to explore the mountains alone. I didn't realize the vast distances out in this country. I lost my pack mule down south of here during the night, and—"

"Hell, feller, didn't yuh hobble 'im?" asked one, in disgust.

"No," Reese said truthfully. "Was that necessary?"

The two cowboys looked at each other expressively. The taller spoke.

"Where'd yuh say yuh was from, stranger?"

Senator Kemp

"St. Louis. My name's Reese. I'm surveying this part of the country for ore for the Phenix Mining Company. I'll admit I'm a little lost."

His smile was disarming. The other cowboy spat and shook his head.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say yuh're lost, pardner," he said solemnly. "Yuh ain't; yuh're right here. It's yore mule and the country that seems to be shifted around. Where d'yuh think yuh're headin'?"

"I THOUGHT if I could find a ranchhouse I could get straightened out. I suppose I should offer a reward for the return of my mule. He belongs to Jeff Murphy at Elkhorn. Do you think—"

"Hell, hombre, nobody thinks in this country. They jest herd cattle, cuss sheep, and burn gunpowder. It's a wonder somebody ain't took a shot at you."

"To tell the truth, somebody did," admitted Reese, pointing to his hat with its two holes through the crown. "That was before I lost my mule."

"Who was it?" demanded one of the men sharply, and Reese was glad he had wrapped the second rifle carefully

in his saddle roll.

"I don't know. I didn't have a chance to ask him any questions. He was too far away."

"Yuh say yore business is surveyin' for ore? Hell, Shorty, take this greenhorn on in to the ranch. Mr. Kemp might wanna chin with 'im."

"Please," protested Reese. "I don't want to leave you men under any misapprehension. I'm not exactly a greenhorn. You see, I—"

"'Course not," Shorty agreed soothingly. "Yuh're jest a shorthorn in a longhorn country. Come on. If yuh've et enough beans, let's travel."

Smiling inwardly, Reese thanked the taller man for the food and got a bit awkwardly into his saddle. "Shorty" Johnson forked his bronc and led the way across the rolling country that had no sign of a trail.

Riding beside the cowhand, Reese began carefully pumping him. Before he knew it Shorty was talking away, telling a lot more than he realized he knew.

"Yeah, Thad Kemp owns this spread. One of the biggest cattlemen in the country—senator, he is, now. I reckon he's about the biggest man in Montana outside of the gov'nor. Owns a lot of land hereabouts. Says there's lot of gold and silver and copper here. He's figgerin' on gittin' the railroad through here purty soon so's he can develop his minin' property. Mebbe yuh're lookin' for Thad Kemp and don't know it."

"Possibly so," agreed Reese. "I thought Senator Kemp was primarily a cattleman."

Shorty scratched his curly head over this puzzler. "He raises steers, if that's what yuh mean. That is, Miss Elsie does. Thad's purty busy helpin' to make a state outa Montana."

"Who is Miss Elsie?" asked Reese.

"Thad's daughter. She's the best cow gal in Montana. She runs the TK. Thad's too busy legislatin'."

"Indeed? And if Senator Kemp is such a power in the state, why doesn't he take a hand in this cattle and sheep trouble they told me was brewing in Elkhorn?"

Shorty's open face clouded.

"Damn them woollies!" he said savagely. "Don't yuh worry none about Thad Kemp not squelchin' things. If a range war starts, he'll have the soldiers down here from Fort Keogh. But we ain't gonna need 'em. Andy Jackson of the Tumblin' J is headin' our cattle raisers' union, and he plans to—"

Shorty broke off guiltily, as though he had said too much. He looked sharply at his guileless companion.

"SAY, yuh're askin' a helluva lot of questions for a tenderfoot."

"Am I?" Reese asked innocently. "I only thought things looked rather black. And that sharpshooter taking a shot at me last night."

"I don't savvy that," grunted Shorty. "Jest where was yuh again?"

"I don't know exactly, Shorty. I should say about twenty miles south of here."

"That would be the Rosebud Mountains. That ain't sheep or cattle country particular."

"I saw plenty of both before I got into the hills proper."

"I mean they ain't no big spreads down thataway. Yuh've come a helluva ways, feller. Funny yuh didn't notice the stagecoach trail when yuh crossed it."

"That must have been in the dark last night. The roads aren't well marked out here."

"Nope," Shorty said seriously. "But I heard that Howard Thorpe was figgerin' on fencin' it all the way to Butte and puttin' up lamp posts every quarter-mile. The only trouble is the Injuns'll likely steal the coal-oil outa the lanterns to fry their meat in."

"You wouldn't make sport of me,

would you, Shorty?"

"Nope—no more'n you would of me, Mr. Sheep Spy!"

Reese turned his head in surprise, and found himself staring into the business end of a six-shooter. Shorty's frank face was heavy with suspicion, and his blue eyes were narrowed slits of anger. His lips were taut, and his gun hand was steady as a rock.

"Don't make a sudden move, pilgrim!" he warned. "Elevate yore hands while I dehorn yuh."

Instantly Reese complied with the order, his mind working rapidly. Somewhere he had slipped up.

"But, see here, Shorty," he protested, "why are you—"

"Shet up!" commanded Shorty, spurring close and reaching suddenly under Reese's left arm inside his coat. "A hide-out gun, huh? Thought me and Pete wouldn't notice—"

That was as far as he got. Like a striking snake Reese's right hand clamped down on his right wrist, the detective's left arm encircling the cowboy's body and lifting him clear of his saddle. The startled Shorty let out a yell. Reflex action tightened his trigger finger, and his six-shooter roared.

Both horses jumped, separated, and Shorty was dangling in the air at his erstwhile prisoner's side, almost unseating the detective. His own cow pony stopped short as its reins trailed to the ground.

"We're both in a fix," panted Reese, hugging the other's squirming body closer. "Drop your gun, Shorty, and pass your word to behave, or I'm coming off my horse with you on the bottom, and we'll finish this on the ground."

"Hell!" panted Shorty. "I give up. This ain't no way for range riders to fight."

"Drop your gun, and take your hand away from mine!" ordered Reese.

Crestfallen, the T K rider obeyed. Reese lowered him lightly to his feet. Horseless, the mounted Reese between him and his gun, Shorty was helpless. Reese did not trouble to draw his own weapon. Sitting his horse easily, he smiled down at the T K cowboy.

"Let's settle this p e a c e a b l y, Shorty," he said. "What made you accuse me of being a sheep spy?"

SHORTY was glaring up in baffled anger. Slowly Reese's good humor had its effect. It was hard to stay mad at this pilgrim, especially in such a ridiculous situation.

"Shucks!" he said, a bit sheepishly. "Yuh look too smart to act so dumb. And now yuh've done proved it."

"I told you I wasn't a greenhorn. And just because I came twenty miles to get lost doesn't mean I'm a spy. As a matter of fact, everything I've told you is the truth. I just haven't told you all the truth, and you've drawn some wrong conclusions. I was lost when I met you, and I do want to get to the T K ranch and see Thaddeus Kemp. So far as I know, I haven't even spoken to a sheepman since I arrived in Montana. Do you want to believe me, or must I march you to your home ranch on foot?"

"Feller, yuh got me," declared Shorty, grinning. "Yuh're white, or yuh'd of shot me. I'll be good."

"Then pick up your gun and let's get on," Reese said crisply.

He waited calmly while the cowboy retrieved his weapon, dusted it off, and examined the barrel. Then, when the cowboy holstered the gun and caught his horse, they moved on.

"Honest, feller, are yuh on the level?" Shorty asked. "Is Reese yore real name?"

"I am, and it is, Shorty," Reese said gravely. "And my friends call me Doc."

"Yuh look like a sawbones or a perfesser at that, Doc."

"Maybe I do," admitted Reese, his

face sober. "You taught me something I won't forget—not to act dumber than I look."

"You taught me a new one yoreself," Shorty said, grinning widely. "How to waltz on hossback."

CHAPTER IX

Senator Kemp

IN his long, low-raftered living room Thaddeus Kemp was entertaining a visitor. Big, expansive of girth, with a triple chin nestling in the cleft of his standing collar, and resplendent in his black cutaway coat and white linen vest, Senator Kemp had sufficiently laid aside the dignity of his office and assumed the stamp of the cattleman in his black cowboy boots with the fancy yellow-thread stitching all over them. On a pair of antlers near the door dangled his braided quirt, and from one prong hung his huge Stetson.

At first glance the senator looked like a California gambler of the hectic days of the 'Fifties. A shock of snow-white hair was brushed straight back from his broad forehead, and he fairly oozed affability. However, a closer inspection revealed the determined line of his jaw beneath its fat, and a firm set to his full lips. His upper chin, once lean and stubborn, rested now on its throne of lesser brethren like a potentate on a dais. His shrewd black eyes had a disconcerting way of stabbing out suddenly like swordpoints whenever he became aroused.

Thad Kemp had climbed to power the hard way. He had fought for everything he possessed. He liked fighting. And he liked, too, winning. A widower with one child, a daughter, he was the soul of cordiality and as bland as old whiskey. Nobody knew what went on in the depths of his keen mind until he spoke his piece. When he did, everybody listened, and most people obeyed him.

Everybody, that is, except Elsie Kemp. This saucy-eyed minx with the same jaw and stubborn lips—without the fat—was the "spit and image" of her sire. When Shorty Johnson said she ran the T K ranch he stated the exact truth. Even had the senator had no other interests beyond his cattle spread it is doubtful whether or not he would successfully have bossed it.

Right now Elsie Kemp was up in arms over the cattle and sheep question. She was heart and soul with the cattlemen, ready and willing to drive the sheepmen and their flocks all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The killing of Frank Jackson of the Tumbling J and the subsequent repercussions around Elkhorn had her fairly boiling.

But for a wonder the representations of Moss Tiernan and Andy Jackson had failed to arouse the senator to his usual fighting pitch. He deeply regretted the bloody affair at Elkhorn, and would assist in punishing the culprits.

He would bring in the soldiers, if needed. Of course, he would back up the cattlemen and the new stock organization. But he would not give the word to start an indiscriminate war on sheepmen in general. Time enough for that if all other means of reaching an amicable settlement failed.

Most important, he didn't want any talk of a sheep war going on while a guest was under his roof. Just what plan or purpose was lodged in the back of the senator's mind no one could guess. But he had been a bit

sluggish about taking up the gage of battle, and this morning he was actually whitewashing the aspect of things.

Elsie raged and fumed, but saw no reason for crossing her father at present. Not before she knew his game. So she listened to the talk between the senator and his guest, rather admiring the looks of this young cattleman from Omaha.

Mr. Henry Hanscomb Ball was worthy of several looks of admiration. Not as boyishly earnest as brown-eyed Andy Jackson and not as suavely poised as sheriff Ted Harper, nevertheless this stranger was handsomer than either. He had cattleman written all over him, but there was something else, too, something that puzzled Elsie Kemp.

HE wasn't a gambler, although his dare-devil air told that he would stake his life on the turn of a card. He wasn't a killer, although he wore a pair of six-shooters and had flexible-looking hands.

Elsie couldn't see why her father objected to telling this man about the range trouble. Anybody could see that he wasn't afraid of trouble. He looked as if he thrived on it.

Maybe it was because her father had sized him up as being too conservative to invest his money in a cattle spread in the face of trouble. That would be a little like tempting Providence, and perhaps that's what her shrewd father saw. Nevertheless, Ball would learn of conditions the moment he was turned loose on the range. There wasn't any sense in pooh-poohing the talk of the range unless—unless Senator Kemp had a design up his ample sleeve. That was it! Her father had something to unload on this stranger from Nebraska. But what was it?

"The future of Montana is very bright, in my opinion, Mr. Ball," the senator was saying in his best political manner. "Yuh've made a wise move in comin' to this country. Of course, yore idea of breedin' fine stock is splendid, but those things take time, and a young man like you oughta get set up in the cattle business as is and work such plans out over a period of years."

"Meanin' what, Senator?" Hank Ball asked lazily, rolling one of his host's fat cigars around in his fingers.

A comfortable bed the night before and three square meals of the kind the senator was partial to had had a softening influence on Hank Ball. The senator went on with an expansive wave of his hand.

"Meaning such as the T K spread, Mr. Ball—or can I call yuh Henry?"

"Call me Hank," said Mr. Ball.

"Hank it is." Thad Kemp smiled affably. "I'll be glad to ride around the range with yuh and show yuh some likely country, but yuh can't do better than settle on that stretch of land right next door to us. I told yuh about it last night. I hold title to most of it, and have plenty of grazin' rights. I can sell yuh the ground reasonably and also sell yuh the nucleus of a herd. Yuh say yuh're shippin' some Herefords out from Chicago. That'll fix yuh up fine. And who knows, yuh might some day take over the T K if—"

Elsie jumped to her feet.

"I should say not!" she burst out indignantly. "I have no intention of selling the T K. Besides, Father, how do you know Mr. Ball would want it? Why—"

"Hank to you, Elsie," Ball said pleasantly.

"All right, Hank!" she cried. "Sit there and grin and be hypnotized by Father's eloquent manner, but you'd better make sure you even want to settle in this part of the country before—"

"Before the comin' of the railroad," the senator cut in calmly. "Because then the value of land'll jump, and yuh can't get in on the ground floor."

This bombshell staggered Elsie for a

moment. She looked at her father with startled eyes.

"THE railroad?" she exclaimed. "Is the railroad coming through here? I thought the line of the Northern Pacific a hundred miles north of here was the only—"

"I'm exertin' all of my—ahem—not inconsiderable influence to get the Chicago and Western to extend westward from Lamar Junction," said the senator. "Negotiations have been under way for a couple of months. True, we are meetin' with some obstacles"—his fat face went grim for an instant—"all of which will be ironed out in due course. The comin' of the railroad will open this country like a flower under the rays of the mornin' sun. Westward the course of empire, yuh know."

"Tell me more about this railroad business," said Hank, showing his first real spark of interest in the conversation.

"Yes," said Elsie. "This is news to me, too."

"It's still in the calvin' stage," enlightened the senator. "But already a proposed right of way has been surveyed. The railroad'll come northwest from Lamar and cross the foot of the T K and head through natural mountain passes into Helena. If Howard Thorpe uses his influence, mebbe the rails might come due west as far as Elkhorn before swingin' northward. That'll save him that forty-mile haul on his stageline from Lamar to Butte. And think what it'll do for the cattle and sheep business! It'll open up Eastern markets without the dangers and losses of trail herds. It'll open up East and West both for such ranches as the T K It'll make the desert bloom like a garden. It'll bring—"

"We haven't any real desert in Montana," said Elsie.

"Mebbe not, my dear. But we have plenty of barren and uncultivated land. I was speakin' figuratively."

"If this is more than a dream," Hank observed shrewdly, "why tell me about it? Why let me in on it?"

"Why, do yuh ask?" the senator said majestically. "Because, young man—er—Hank, we need energetic men of vision like yoreself. Montana is a land of golden opportunity for young men. There's plenty of room to grow. Do yuh know there ain't one person to the square mile in this great state? There ain't—"

Interruption came in the persons of Shorty Johnson and Steve Reese.

"Hi, Thad — er — Senator Kemp," greeted the cowboy as he entered. "Howdy, Miss Elsie. This here is Doc Reese. I found him lost on the west section close to Muggles Creek. He's a geolo—gello—a prospectin' perfessor. Excuse me, I didn't know yuh had comp'ny."

The senator nodded as he looked up. Then, as the import of his hired hand's words struck him, he looked a bit startled. The sight of Reese standing in the doorway, his hat in hand, a faint smile on his fine, intelligent face, brought the senator out of his chair with a bound.

"Dr. Reese?" he said quickly. "Come right in, sir. I'm Thad Kemp. This is my daughter. And this is Mr. Hank Ball from Omaha."

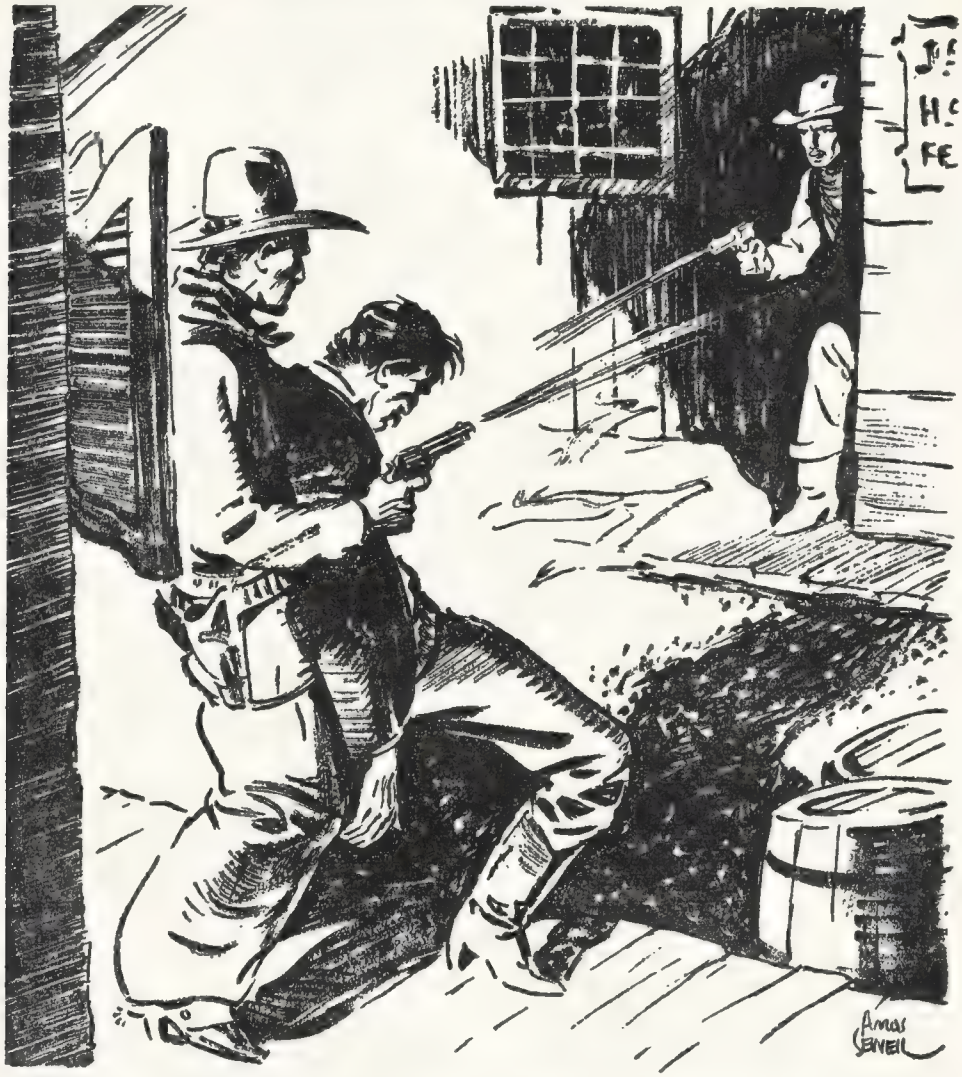
Elsie received one admiring glance from Reese's limpid black eyes, and she was almost in confusion as she acknowledged the introduction. Then Reese stepped forward to clasp the senator's hand.

"I was exploring out from Elkhorn, and I seem to have got myself pretty well lost," he explained in his cultured voice. "If it hadn't been for Shorty and Pete, I'd still be wandering around."

HANK BALL had got slowly to his feet.

"Howdy, Doctor," he greeted.

Reese's smile did not change as he shook hands with the man from Omaha,



Reese reached Thorpe just in time to catch his slumping form against his chest (Chap. XX)

but his grip tightened until Hank felt his phalanges pop.

"I'm not really a doctor," Reese said pleasantly, and then, to them all: "I am a geologist. My friends call me Doc."

"Do yuh squeeze oil outa rocks—Doc?" Hank asked gravely as he examined his relinquished hand.

Reese's face was bland as he replied: "No, Mr. Ball. I'm not exactly interested in oil. My work pertains to ore-bearing rock. You say you're from Omaha? I'd like to chat with you after a bit. I've some friends there."

"Likely I know 'em," Hank said. "My work pertains to cattle."

Reese laughed and they all joined in. A moment later Reese had in some magical way put them all at ease. He explained his predicament in a comical way, and the senator assured him he would see him safely back to Elkhorn. Shorty turned to ride back to Muggles Creek.

"Thank you again, Shorty," Reese said warmly. "I won't forget you."

"I won't forget you neither," Shorty assured him.

They all went out on the porch, and Elsie went to call one of the hands from the corrals to care for Reese's horse. While Kemp walked down the steps with Shorty, giving him some instructions, Hank and Reese stood alone for a minute.

"Was it Shorty perforated yore new bonnet?" the redhead asked in a low, quick voice. "Is that why yuh won't forget 'im?"

"No," replied Reese, flashing his anxious-eyed companion an approving look. "The gun that did it is in my saddle roll. The man was a complete stranger. I want you to find out who he was. You seem to be doing nicely here. Having a good time?"

"Don't get funny. This was yore idea. I'm learnin' a few things which ain't writ down in a stock book, all right. The old boy froze right onto me. I think he wants to sell me this spread, and he's already runnin' choo-choo trains across it for me."

"What?" asked Reese incredulously.

" 'S fact. He's workin' to bring the Chicago and Western on west from Lamar. He talks big about the future of Montana, and nary a word about the sheep and cattle trouble."

"Not even when Sheriff Harper was here to see him?"

"The sheriff hasn't been here," was Hank's surprising answer. "Not since noon yestiddy, unless he's disguised as a cowhand."

"Odd," reflected Reese. "He left Elkhorn to see the senator."

"You better get to work on the old man. I smell somethin', but I don't know what. He hasn't let me run around loose among the men yet."

"I will," Reese promised. "You leave here as quickly as you can get away and go over to the Tumbling J. The fellow who tried to bushwhack me rode a Tumbling J horse."

"What did yuh do with him?"

"Buried him in the Rosebud Mountains."

HANK'S eyebrows went up. "Yuh killed him, took his gun, and buried him. All yuh can tell me is he rode a Tumblin' J hoss—and yuh want me to find out all about him."

Swiftly Reese described the man, not forgetting the v-shaped scar on his left temple.

"He may not have been a Jackson hand," he said. "I'm sure he followed me out from Elkhorn. Anyway, find out who he was and why he was after me. Jackson doesn't know me. He didn't even see me in the stagecoach yesterday. Get word to me in Elkhorn. You can meet me without suspicion, now that we've been introduced, and give me a full report. If you miss me, leave word with Judge Tankard. He knows, and he's all right."

"Dally!" Hank nodded briefly. "In the meantime, look over a pair of hands workin' on this spread named Slim Tarp and Tennessee Ackley. I don't like 'em. See yuh in town tomorrow, then. Accordin' to the map we studied, Elwood's place is jest a few miles north of Elkhorn."

"No word from Dusty yet," said Reese. "He hasn't had time to contact me yet. Get going. Here comes Kemp."

CHAPTER X

A New Hand

DUSTY TRAIL was having troubles of his own. After parting from his two companions in Lamar, having told them both what he thought of the dirty deal they'd handed him—making a sheepherder out of him—the chunky cowboy bought a handful of cigars at the ho-

tel counter and set out for the sheep ranch of Bill Elwood.

He smoked furiously as he jogged along. For the first few miles he followed the main trail from Lamar. Then, as he neared the seat of the trouble, he cut across country. The map of the surrounding terrain was firmly fixed in his mind. Gifted with a sense of direction like many men born and bred on the Western plains, he had no fear of losing himself.

Carefully he considered the situation. He examined himself and his equipment with a jaundiced eye. High-heeled boots, spurs, quirt, neckerchief, cow pony, six-guns—Hell, he even smelled like a cattleman. He could divest himself of lariat and clothes and put on a pair of overalls and a sheepskin coat, but he knew he'd never pass as a sheepman.

His orders were to get in with Bill Elwood and the sheep raisers and learn their side of the matter, ferreting out any crookedness. That was all. How he did it was his own funeral. Steve Reese had left the method up to him, knowing that Dusty would not fail him. And that made Dusty mad, too, because he knew that he'd never let his superior down.

There was no use trying to disguise himself in the limited time at his disposal. No matter what he did, he still would not be a sheepman. So he decided to ride headlong into the mess as a strange cowboy and play things the way they came up.

He reached the Elwood ranch some miles north of Elkhorn while Hank was still riding to meet Thad Kemp, and Doc was still rambling around Lamar getting ready to take the stagecoach to Elkhorn. High up on a mountain trail Dusty halted and looked down in some surprise at the sheep spread in the wide valley below him.

As he studied the picture he was astonished to see how similar it was to a cattle ranch. There were several small flocks of woollies, true, but the lay-out was the same as hundreds of cattle spreads he had seen and worked on. The buildings sprawled just the same. There were horse corrals and stock pens, a blacksmith's shed, and several big barns. Off to one side was what appeared to be a dipping pen or tank, but even some cattle ranches had that. He even saw cows!

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Dusty urged his mount down the winding trail and rode into the valley of sheep. A couple of men on foot and armed with rifles halted him as he reached the lowlands. A pair of shaggy, fierce-looking collie dogs came barking and leaping around him. One of the men looked like a cattle hand to Dusty. The other man looked like a half-breed Indian. He couldn't figure it out.

"Hold up, stranger!" commanded the fellow with the cow look about him. "Where yuh think yuh're goin'?"

"Driftin' mostly," Dusty answered him calmly. "What place is this?"

"Call off them dogs, White Cloud," growled the spokesman to his companion. "This is the Elwood sheep ranch, yuh damn' cow spy! And yuh dang well know it."

Dusty surveyed the white man as the half-breed silenced the dogs. The rifle menaced him, but he ignored it.

"Listen, feller," he said firmly, "I don't know you, but I already don't like yuh. I'm a stranger in this country and it's dinner time. Where I come from it's customary to feed a traveler, and no questions asked. Them words of yores sound like yuh're lookin' for trouble. I hail from Kansas, and I don't savvy yore lingo. Jest what is a cow spy?"

THE man with the rifle scowled and looked a bit undecided.

"Yuh're a cowboy, or I'm goin' blind," he growled.

"That," said Dusty significantly, "is different. Shore, I've herded lots of critters in my time—cattle among 'em. Have yuh got any objections?"

White Cloud, who had been staring at the horseman stolidly, now spoke.

"Him true stranger, Jordan. Never seeum before. Mebbeso owlhoot."

Jordan's expression changed subtly. He eyed Dusty Trail in sharper interest.

"What's yore name, feller?" he demanded.

"Dusty Trail," the Association man answered him truthfully. His name was unknown here.

"Lookin' for anybody in particular?" pursued Jordan.

Dusty had an inspiration. He played his hunch, realizing that it might end up in gunfire, but he had to dig in somwhere.

"No," he answered curtly. "But since yuh mention it, do yuh know a feller named Bass Marlowe?"

"Who don't?" growled Jordan. "Bootleg Bass was the cause of all that rumpus down to Elkhorn a week ago."

"What rumpus?" Dusty demanded quickly.

"So yuh don't know?"

"Never havin' been in Elkhorn, I don't." And then he denied hastily: "I don't know Bass Marlowe, either. All I know is that I tend to my own business."

"Them kind of jaspers live longer," Jordan nodded. "Get goin' at a walk, Dusty. We'll go let Bill Elwood look yuh over. I'm purty good with a rifle, so don't get no funny ideas. White Cloud, stay on guard."

Slowly Dusty Trail walked his horse on into Bill Elwood's guarded valley. They were nearing the main house when a man in a dirty apron came out on the porch and vigorously tolled a cowbell. Half a dozen men straggled from various spots on the place and made for the house. A couple of them waited curiously at the porch for Jordan and his prisoner to approach.

"Grub time," grunted Jordan. "I reckon yuh get fed, feller."

"Hey, Jord, who yuh got there?" hailed one of the men.

"A stray," called Jordan. "Where's the boss?"

A man stepped out on the porch, a tall, angular individual with cool gray eyes, and Dusty knew he was looking at Bill Elwood.

"What is this?" Elwood demanded sharply of Jordan, but never taking his eyes off the horseman.

"Comp'ny for dinner," said Jordan. "A strange cowhand from Kansas. Says his name's Dusty somethin' or other."

Elwood stepped to the edge of the porch and studied the stranger keenly. Dusty returned the stare with interest.

"Yuh understand, stranger, that yuh're on a sheep ranch?" Elwood asked.

"So Jordan told me kinda forcefullike. And I seen some woollies from up on the trail. Whatcha got to guard 'em with guns for? They grow golden fleece or somethin'?"

"There's trouble on this range between cattle and sheep," Elwood quietly explained. "Bein' a stranger, yuh wouldn't mebbe know. So I'm tellin' yuh. Yuh can leave or stay. Personally, I got no quarrel with strangers. Yuh're welcome to come in if yuh're a mind to. Jordan, put away yore rifle."

"Oh!" said Dusty, nodding. "I see. Since it don't make no difference to me, and I ain't ridin' for no cattle outfit, I'll come in. I don't know anything about sheep. I always say what yuh don't know won't hurt yuh."

ELWOOD showed him where to wash up, and they sat down around a well grubbed table. There

was an air of suspicion and restraint over the few herders present, but Dusty ignored it. He cracked jokes and told funny experiences and was so amusing in general that he had them all in smiles, except Jordan, before the meal was over.

During the meal, he sized up his companions without appearing to do so. All of them save Jordan seemed to be regular sheepherders so far as he could tell. But there was an air about Jordan that was different. The same was true of Elwood himself.

After dinner the men went back to work, and Elwood talked with his guest as they strolled around the ranchhouse.

"Don't seem like yuh got many sheep, Mr. Elwood," observed Dusty, h o n e s t l y puzzled. "Many hands, either."

"On a sheep ranch, except at special times," explained Elwood, "yuh don't work as many men as yuh do on a cattle spread. We do a lot of herdin' with dogs. And this time of the year yuh won't see many sheep in the valleys. They're mostly up in the hills. That's where most of my flocks are now—with a dozen dogs and half a dozen shepherds. These men here are relief men. Come winter, we bring the flocks down to the lowlands."

"Jest what is the big argument between sheep and cattle? We ain't bothered much with woollies in my country."

Elwood eyed his questioner reflectively.

"The biggest trouble," he informed, "is that sheep have sharp little hoofs and cut the grass roots pretty badly. Then they graze closer'n cattle. They say that land sheep have grazed on for a year ain't no good for three years, and I reckon that's about the truth. That's mostly why cattlemen hate the woollies. I used to—until I got into the business."

"So that's it!" Dusty nodded. "I knew there was somethin' about yuh. Yuh used to be a cattleman."

"Years ago," Elwood admitted. "I still have dairy cows."

"I seen 'em. But, here in Montana where there's plenty of free range for cattle and sheep, why is there trouble between 'em?"

"I don't know why yuh ask that question," said Elwood, "but I'll answer it. The cattle herds are increasin' rapidly, comin' up in waves from Texas. Some day this country will be crowded. That's what is gonna come. Why there is trouble right now is due to the attitude of the cowmen. Down in Elkhorn about a week ago—"

And the sheepman launched into an explanation of the events which had been instrumental in bringing the three Association men into Montana.

"The cattlemen pretend to believe that us sheepmen are tryin' to run 'em out," he concluded bleakly, "while we know we had nothin' to do with that courtroom battle. But we ain't takin' a lickin' lyin' down. So both sides are ready to fight it out. I've tried to be fair, but the damned fools won't listen to reason since Frank Jackson was killed. Shore, I had words with Jackson the night before, but I didn't start it. Then, in the courtroom, I offered to defend Marlowe. I'd have done the same for a dog. But now"—his tone was bitter—"every cattleman on the range thinks I'm behind that massacre. My life ain't safe unless I'm with a crowd of my men or a bunch of sheepmen. That's why this valley is guarded, feller. That's why a war is comin' sure as God made little apples. We had a brush with Tumblin' J men only this mornin'. That's why I'm guardin' this valley so careful."

"Uh-huh." Dusty blinked his owlish eyes and risked a final question. "Well, if the sheepmen ain't to blame, who is?"

"The cattle growers!" Elwood bit out the words as though they stung.

"They started things by crowdin' in on us. And after the shootin' at Elkhorn they began poisonin' our water sources. As an excuse they're claimin' we are shootin' their cattle and leavin' 'em to rot on the range. They've asked for trouble, and they're shore as hell gonna get it."

DUSTY wanted to ask about Jordan, but realized he had already shown as much curiosity as he dared.

"Yuh ain't got any sorta job yuh could give me, have yuh?" he asked.

"After what I've jest told yuh, yuh ask me for a job?"

"Because of it," Dusty said significantly. "Looks like yuh might be needin' men that can shoot."

Elwood faced squarely about and looked searchingly in the smaller man's eyes.

"I reckon I'm a fool to do it," he said, in a hard voice, "but I am gonna need men. So I'm hirin' yuh, Trail. But listen! If yuh happen to be a spy in the pay of the cattlemen—if I catch yuh in one false move, yuh won't live to appear in Judge Tankard's court. Remember that. For I'll break yuh in two with my bare hands."

The very intensity of the sheep raiser made Dusty Trail feel as if a blast of heat from an oven had swept across him.

Just what would Elwood do if he knew that Dusty was a detective for the Cattlemen's Protective Association? It was like putting his head in a hungry bear's mouth and then kicking him in the belly.

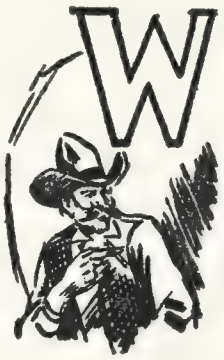
"Understand me, Trail?" Elwood repeated. "I mean every word I say, and if somethin' happens to me, there'll be others to fix yuh. I'm takin' yuh at yore own valuation, but I ain't a plumb fool. Do yuh still want the job?"

Steadily Dusty Trail answered.

"Yuh've hired yoreself a new hand, Mr. Elwood."

CHAPTER XI

Cross Purposes



WITH some trepidation Dusty Trail entered upon his new duties. That he was playing with fire he understood perfectly. But Bill Elwood was a logical suspect for the range trouble. If not the main spring of the incipient range war, he was one of the main pawns in the game.

The story Elwood told sounded straightforward and honest, but men had the habit of twisting facts to conform to their own ends. Elwood had quarreled with Jackson. He had deliberately offered to defend the cattle rustlers in court. One of the raiders, the one killed, had been a sheepherder. And Elwood frankly admitted that he was bitter against the cattlemen.

Yet all that did not convict the man. And Steve Reese's instructions had been, not to prove Elwood guilty, but to find out the true facts. There would be right on both sides, as well as wrong on both sides. It was up to Dusty Trail to vindicate or damn Bill Elwood. And Elwood himself hadn't made the task any easier.

Having crashed right in, admittedly a cowboy whose natural sympathies should be with the cattlemen, Dusty had offered his guns in defense of sheep. No wonder Elwood had warned him. And the fact that the sheepman had accepted him, permitting the entrance of a possible spy into his ranks, looked funny. Either the man was painfully honest and confident of his own ability to handle things, or he was playing a deep game.

And then there was Jordan.

Jordan singled out the new hand after supper. Elwood had ridden down the valley with a couple of men to see about a young ram that had broken its leg.

"So yuh've hired out here, have yuh, Fat?" sneered Jordan.

Dusty's smile faded. But he didn't look dangerous. He never did until his guns were flaming.

"Jordan," he said gently, "ordinary I don't mind folks callin' me nickback from yellow teeth in a crooked smile. "Honest, Mr. Trail, I didn't mean no harm."

"I accept yore apology," Dusty said seriously while the other men sitting on the porch snickered.

"Hell, Fat," Jordan snapped curtly. "C'mon. Yuh're to stand guard at the south trail till midnight."

Dusty carefully weighed things in his mind. Then he sighed wearily and passed up the insult. He was on a case. Personal matters to wait on

FOLLOW JIM HATFIELD, ACE TEXAS RANGER

As He Fights
a Syndicate of Range Destroyers
in

GUNSMOKE EMPIRE

in the February Issue of Our
Companion Magazine

TEXAS RANGERS

Now on Sale At All Stands—10c Per Copy

names. I know I ain't no hairpin like you are, and I wouldn't get proddy, but I don't like the way yuh talk. My name is Dusty Trail—if yuh've forgot."

Jordan, thin as a fence rail and having the general appearance of a mean razorback hog, guffawed lustily. Dusty waited quietly until he was through.

"Feller, yuh plumb scare me to death," Jordan said, his lips pulled

duty. Without a word he got up and followed Jordan out through the dusk.

"If I'm standin' guard, hadn't I better get my rifle?" he asked.

"Nope. Yuh can use White Cloud's when yuh relieve him."

They walked on for a space in silence. The tinkle of a bell on an old bell-wether drifted faintly up the valley. The lowing of one of the milch cows in the pasture behind the house came to them like a placid requiem

for the departing day. The homely smell of stock, of the ragweed growing beside the dusty lane smote the young Texan's nostrils like an engulfing wave.

FOR a moment Dusty experienced a flash of homesickness. He saw again the cabin on the Texas flats, the gleaming campfire in the twilight, his father strumming a guitar in the doorway while his mother sang throat-aching songs of Kentucky, while a sturdy little towhead that was little Josiah Trail of the long ago crept into her arms and whispered, "I'll be a good boy, Muvver."

All this was dispelled in a flash as Jordan whirled on him and spoke savagely.

"If I'd thought yuh was dangerous, feller, I'd put a bullet through yuh when yuh come down the trail."

"I don't claim to be dangerous, Jordan," Dusty said mildly, exasperated with himself for having such tender thoughts in the company of this coarse brute.

"That's better." Jordan chuckled. Then he frowned darkly. "But there's somethin' fishy about the way yuh horned in here. What did yuh mean by what yuh said about Bass Marlowe?"

"Nothin'."

"Don't gimme that," said Jordan roughly. "It ain't natural for a cowpoke to go to work on a sheep spread."

"What are you doin' here, then?"

Jordan started. "Never mind me. How about you? Uncork yore bottle, Fat."

"What's wrong with me workin' here?" Dusty demanded sullenly. "I ain't sayin' it's so, mind, but if a cowboy wanted to disappear, no sher—I mean nobody'd ever think of lookin' for him on a sheep ranch."

"So that's it!" said Jordan. "C'mon." And he walked on.

Smiling grimly, Dusty followed.

"So that's why yuh was askin' about Bass Marlowe," commented Jordan after a space.

"A feller I met on the trail said he knew him and that he was up here in Montana," Dusty stated defensively. "I didn't know nothin' about him."

"Do yuh wanna learn?" Jordan shot out suddenly.

"What d'yuh mean?" Dusty asked guardedly.

Jordan seemed to ponder for a moment before he said rapidly:

"Don't say nothin' to any of the other hands here. I heard yuh tell Elwood yuh would hire out as a gunslinger. I don't know how good yuh are, but if yuh ain't jest a big-talkin' kid, yuh might could get to meet Marlowe—soon. More money in it than in herdin' sheep."

"Yuh mean Bass Marlowe is in cahoots with Bill Elwood somehow?"

"I didn't say," snarled Jordan. "I was jest talkin'. Keep yore trap shut and wait."

Dusty did just that. Just to look at the villainous Jordan made his gorge rise, but he swallowed his dislike and bided his time. So his first hunch regarding this fellow was working out. He had felt there was somthing phony about Jordan, and this was it. But how did Elwood fit in the picture?

All the following day he covertly watched the big sheep rancher, but Elwood never seemed to say or do a thing out of the way. His conversation with all of his hands, including Jordan, was matter-of-fact and germane to the business of sheep. During the morning Dusty got a strange insight into the man's character.

HE had brought in the crippled ram the night before and reset the broken leg and bandaged it. In the morning Dusty found him busy at the blacksmith's shed and asked what he was doing.

"Yuh know, Dusty, I'm beginnin' to

like yore face," said Elwood, hammering away on the anvil. "Every time I look at yuh I feel like smilin'. And I ain't felt like laughin' for a helluva long time. I'm makin' a crutch for that crippled ram. If he was big as a hoss I could put him in a stall in a sling. As it is, I can't keep him hogtied till the bone knits, so I'm makin' him a skeleton leg to walk on."

This was a new one to the range-bred Dusty. He watched in silence for a moment. Then, as Elwood stoked his forge and thrust a piece of iron into the coals to heat:

"Looks kinda like yuh're goin' to more trouble than the woollie's worth," he offered dubiously.

"It ain't the value."

"Be less trouble to shoot him."

Elwood didn't answer for a long moment. "I don't like shootin'," he said finally.

Later, just before dinner time, Dusty saw him fitting the queer contraption on the ram, working as tenderly as a woman. What was more surprising, makeshift and awkward as the thing was, it worked. Barring further accidents, the ram stood a splendid chance for a perfect recovery, staggering around in the little enclosure Elwood put him in.

Dusty walked away thoughtfully, leaving his employer feeding the puzzled ram, scratching his horn butts and talking with him. The picture lived with the young Texan all day long.

At dinner, when asked by one of the other hands about it, Elwood simply said:

"The ram'll make it. I'll take care of him."

Before the conclusion of the meal he remarked: "There'll be a meetin' of sheep raisers in Elkhorn tomorrow night. Reckon we'd better ride line camps this afternoon and tomorrow mornin' to make shore everything is all right."

Jordan looked up.

"Who's ridin' where, Boss?" he asked, with his ugly mouth full.

"I'll take the west circle since it's the longest. Mebbe camp with one of the boys tonight. You take the east, Jordan. That'll let yuh get back home tonight to watch after things. Better take Jones to replace Parker . . . Oh, never mind. We can do that next week."

"Yessir," mumbled Jordan. "You can go with me, Trail, and see what sheep herdin's like."

Elwood glanced at his newest hand and started to speak. Then he thought better of it.

After dinner the three of them saddled their horses and rode down the valley toward the west. They parted company where the trail forked around a huge butte, Jordan and Dusty riding to the right, and Elwood to the left.

Mid-afternoon Dusty saw his first mountain sheep camp—a little shack with a solitary herder and two dogs surrounded by an undulating landscape of woollies. Jordan conferred with the herder, asked about conditions and grub, promised a relief the following week, and led Dusty onward.

"We'll bear more north after a bit," he told his companion after awhile. "I wanna see a feller."

Far in the recesses of the northern hills they came upon a little cabin hidden in a small ravine just below the timber line. A saddle horse was tethered to a tree.

JORDAN whistled warily, and a man came out of the cabin. He was a huge fellow with shaggy black hair and a sullen look on his face. At sight of Dusty his face darkened in a scowl.

"What the hell, Jordan?" he growled.

"Take it easy, pard," said Jordan,

grinning. "This here feller is a cowboy on the scout from Kansas. He's workin' on the spread. I jest come up to tell yuh tonight's a good time. Are yuh all set?"

"Been waitin' for nearly a week for yore signal," grunted the big fellow, eyeing Dusty sharply. "What d'yuh bring this jasper along for?"

"Jest for the ride. Thought yuh might wanna look 'im over. He'll be with me."

"All right," the big man growled surlily.

"Let's travel, Dusty," said Jordan. "One more camp to visit on our way back."

Dusty Trail waited patiently for his companion to explain the strange meeting, but Jordan didn't talk. They stopped by Parker's camp on the swing back and then made it to the home valley as night was falling.

The cook grumbled, but warmed up some supper for them. The other men had eaten long ago and were lounging on the porch. Jordan sent two of them out on guard duty against possible surprise from the cattlemen and then sat down across from Dusty and filled his plate. The cook went back to his solitaire game in the bunkhouse, leaving the two men alone.

"And that's sheep herdin'," sneered Jordan. "How'd yuh like countin' woollies by yoreself all day, week after week?"

"I reckon it gets plenty lonesome," agreed Dusty, attacking his food with relish. Then he thought of Elwood and the iron leg for the ram. "But there's other sides to it that get a feller."

He started to mention what Elwood had done, but desisted. He knew Jordan would not understand. They finished their meal in silence, all the while Jordan shooting amused glances at his companion.

As he pushed back his plate, he glanced at his watch, and spoke.

"Ain't yuh got no curiosity at-all, Fat? Don't yuh wanna know who that feller was we met up in the hills?"

"I've been waitin' for yuh to tell me," Dusty said calmly. "I'm guessin' it was Bass Marlowe."

Jordan laughed coarsely. "For a fat cowboy, yore guesser is in bang-up condition. That's why I took yuh along today. I wanted Bass to see yuh before tonight so he wouldn't take yuh for a sheep herder."

"What d'yuh mean?" asked Dusty sharply. "What about tonight?"

"Tonight, while Elwood's away," Jordan explained callously, "Bass and some of the boys will pay us a visit and slaughter a few sheep and tear up things in general. When Elwood gets back he'll find most of his hands shot up and jest you and me able to tell him the cattlemen have raided us."

"What?" choked Dusty, staring at the man in horror.

Jordan cheerfully repeated his statement.

"No!" cried Dusty. "Why, yuh dirty snake, I never dreamed that was what yuh was framin' up! Yuh ain't gonna do no such thing!"

Jordan's smile froze on his ugly features. A terrible, flat look came into his eyes.

"AND who's gonna stop it?" he snarled. "Are you goin' soft, Fat?"

"I'll stop it!" shouted Dusty. "I'll warn the men right now!"

"Sit back down!" snarled Jordan, his fingers curving on the table top. "So I misguessed yuh, did I? Well, that's yore hard luck."

Dusty's pale eyes seemed to settle back into his head as he paused, his hands on the table.

"Jordan," he said softly, "I warned yuh once. That was enough. If yuh don't help me undo the awful thing yuh've—"

Jordan moved. His hand disappeared

from the table and came up with his six-shooter. The gun roared once as it cleared the table.

But Dusty was not there. He had hurled himself backward in the same instant, shoving the heavy table against Jordan. Like darting snakes his hands dropped to his thighs, and both guns boomed out a twin bellow not a split second behind Jordan's fire. Twin holes appeared just above the treacherous herder's eyes.

He jerked once and went over backward to sprawl on the floor, stiff in death.

"I reckon yuh ain't crossin' the river yuh was named after, feller," Dusty said coolly, blowing the smoke from his guns and reholstering them.

Then he whirled to run out of the house to warn the other men of their impending danger. And halted in his tracks.

There in the doorway stood Bill Elwood, his face as bleak as a granite bluff. He was panting from running, but he held a rifle steadily in his hands. Behind him crowded the herders, alarmed by the shots. From the kitchen doorway came the cook, a shotgun in his hands.

"Well," said Elwood, his voice metallic as he glanced from Dusty to the sprawled figure of Jordan. "Well, it looks like it was lucky I come back home to feed the ram."

"It sure is!" Dusty exclaimed in relief. "Mr. Elwood, Jordan made a trip to see—"

"Don't move!" Elwood warned coldly. "I can see that yuh've killed my top herder. I told yuh yestiddy what I'd do if I caught yuh in a single false move, feller."

"Hey!" cried Dusty hotly. "Yuh don't understand. Yuh don't understand! I'm tryin'—"

"I didn't, but I do now," interrupted the sheepman. "Take his guns, cookie. One of yuh boys get a rope from the smithy."

CHAPTER XII

The Extra Rifle

AS soon as both his guests announced their intentions of traveling on, Senator Thad Kemp got ants in his pants.

"If yuh'll stay over tomorrow, Hank," he said, "I'll ride over to Jackson's place with yuh. I thought I'd ride on in to Elkhorn with Reese this afternoon and set him right. Yuh can stay and finish lookin' over the T K with Elsie while I'm gone, and—"

"Sorry," Hank shook his head firmly. "I've took up enough of yore time and hospitality. I'll be seein' yuh in Elkhorn in a day or so."

Kemp, obviously worried, tried a new tack. "If yuh're plumb set on leavin' this afternoon, how about ridin' on to town with us? We can stay all night in Elkhorn, and ride out to the Tumblin' J in the mornin'."

"Nope," said Hank. "Thanks jest the same, but I'll be moseyin' along now."

"Shall we ride over to the Tumblin' J with Hank, Mr. Reese?" Kemp appealed. "We can ride on to town come mornin'."

Reese smiled a pleasant denial. "I'm sorry, Senator Kemp, but I haven't any business there. You go ahead with Ball if you like. Just show me the trail to town."

The white thatched old cattleman seemed in a quandary.

"Dang it!" he exploded. "I want to talk to yuh, Reese, about ore. I'll ride to town with yuh. Lemme speak to Hank a minute."

The senator pulled the young cattleman aside.

"See here, Hank," he said, "I must confess there's quite some—ahem—talk about trouble with the sheepmen, but yuh mustn't pay too much attention to that. It's mostly talk, and I'll settle with the sheep raisers when the time comes. They got as much right to grow sheep in this country as the rest of us has to raise cattle and hosses. Young Andy Jackson's a bit hot under the collar right now over the death of his dad. Yuh needn't take anything he says too seriously."

"I won't," Hank promised gravely, leading the way toward the corral.

Reese and the old rancher followed him more slowly. They all rounded the corner of the ranchhouse in time to see two men busily going through the saddle roll on Reese's mount.

"Hey!" shouted Hank, taking in the situation at a glance. "What are you two lobos doin'?"

The two men started apart, one on each side of the horse, and whirled. Other men, attracted at the shout, came toward the corral from various spots. Reese, suddenly apprehensive, started forward.

"Tarp and Ackley," Hank clipped as Reese overtook him. "I told yuh about this pair."

"Slim" Tarp was a broken-nosed man with heavy eyebrows and black hair. "Tennessee" Ackley was a lean-faced individual of middle age with a gray mustache and the bearing of an ex-cavalry trooper. Both men had shallow-looking eyes; Reese knew at once why Hank had not liked them. They had the snakelike eyes of true killers. Both of them had ugly expressions on their faces now as they crouched, ready for action.

"What's it to you, Redhead?" sneered Ackley.

Hank halted and set himself, smelling trouble. Senator Kemp rushed forward, passing both Association men in his haste.

"What's the meanin' of this, boys?" he demanded. "Searchin' Mr. Reese's belongin's like that. Yuh was told to feed that hoss—not monkey with the gear."

"You know what the meanin' is, Boss," Ackley said sullenly. "With things like they is, we gotta be suspicious of every stranger."

THE broken-nosed Tarp turned swiftly to the long saddle roll. But as he laid hands upon it, Reese leaped forward and swung a sharp blow at his chin. The blow landed with an audible crack, and snapped the fellow's head back He staggered backward a couple of steps before he could halt, and then went into a gun crouch.

Ackley had already done so, and his weapon was half out of its holster when Hank Ball's voice arrested him. The Redhead stood, legs braced apart, one gun held carelessly at his hip, the snout leering unwinkingly at the flat-eyed cowhand.

"Reach for the sky, feller!" Hank's voice whipped out. "Doc Reese will handle his affairs without any help from yore shootin' iron."

It was Thad Kemp who prevented gunplay. He ran forward and interposed himself between Tarp and Reese.

"Stop this foolishness," he said curtly. "What in hell do yuh mean, anyhow, Tarp?"

The cowhand slowly straightened from his crouch and raised his hand to his aching jaw. His glare at Reese was venomous.

"Look for yoreself!" he snarled. "This feller ain't no stray rock chipper. There's another rifle hid in his saddle roll—and that's all they is there. Ask him what he's doin' with two rifles."

Kemp looked inquiringly at Reese. The circle of T K men gathered in closer.

"That's right," Reese admitted levelly. "I found that gun down south of here last night. As there wasn't anybody to claim it, I simply brought it

along with me."

"Let's see the gun," said Kemp, his voice hard and cold.

Reese shrugged. "Help yourself."

Slim Tarp's wiry hands flew to the saddle cantle, loosened the roll, and pulled forth the concealed rifle. As his eyes fell on it, they widened incredulously. He sniffed at the barrel.

"Hell, Tennessee!" he exclaimed to his pardner. "Look! And she's been fired recent."

Ackley turned his head. At sight of the gun he stiffened slightly.

"You two shorthorns wouldn't know anybody that uses a gun like that, would yuh?" Hank asked softly.

Slim Tarp had recovered his composure.

"Not offhand," he denied, glancing at his employer.

"Let me see the gun," ordered Kemp, holding out his hand.

Tarp put the weapon in his hands, and Reese watched the old rancher's face sharply. But there was no expression beyond curiosity on his countenance as he examined the rifle. Nevertheless, his manner was suspicious as he turned back to the man who had brought in the gun.

"Yuh can put yore hardware up, Hank," he said to Ball. "I'll take care of this."

Menaced by the circle of cowhands, Hank slowly complied. He glanced at Reese for guidance. His superior appeared unruffled, but there was air of tension hovering over them.

"Slim and Tennessee are right, Reese," stated the owner of the T K spread. "Lots of queer things are goin' on, and we have to question every stranger. I don't reckon yuh mind tellin' me the whole story?"

"No." Reese smiled slightly. "I don't mind."

And he immediately obliged with the same story he had told Shorty Johnson. Only Hank Ball knew that it was not exactly the truth. When Reese finished, he turned searching eyes to the two visitors.

"You men recognized that gun," he accused. "Whose is it?"

THE men exchanged glances.

"It looks like a gun that a feller named Cluett on the Tumblin' J carries," Tarp admitted sullenly. "I was jest wonderin'."

Senator Kemp looked at him sharply. And Tarp nodded imperceptibly. It seemed to Reese that the old rancher almost looked pleased.

"I don't know him," said Kemp. "Yuh might ask about the feller when yuh get over to Jackson's place, Hank. That's all, men. Tarp, you and Ackley better get on with yore line ridin'."

The group broke up, Reese and Kemp returning to the house. Hank watched the two surly cowhands saddle up, then waving a gay farewell to Elsie Kemp, and leaving Kemp and Reese to argue things out to suit themselves, he made a swift survey of his own equipment. Finding his accoutrement unmolested, he swung lightly into saddle and lit a shuck in the direction of the Tumbling J range.

As he rode he turned over in his mind a number of things. The two men, Tarp and Ackley, had recognized Reese's second rifle; of that there was no doubt. But why had they so hastily denied their knowledge? They were cattle workers. So, obviously, was the unknown drygulcher. But why would a cowman attempt to kill Steve Reese?

Hank went over the same ground Reese had, without getting any nearer the solution. Of one thing he was sure; Reese would certainly put the precious pair under the keen microscope of his mind.

About Thaddeus Kemp, however, Hank was not able to make a decision. The old senator had cattleman written all over him, in spite of his more recently acquired mannerisms. But

he was certainly straddling the fence like a canny politician. He had not talked as a good cattleman should. Standing up for sheep like that and inferring that he might sell his cattle spread.

No wonder his daughter was angry with him. The whole thing looked crazy. Well, that was something else for Steve Reese to puzzle out. Hank had plenty of work cut out for himself.

He took his bearings by the sun and rode on across the trackless range. With luck, he figured, he should reach the Jackson spread by mid-afternoon. There was only one real mountain to cross, although there were numerous hills and buttes and rolling plains which laced the face of the land like wrinkles of time and care.

Occasionally he saw drifting clumps of cattle, mingled stock of two or three ranches here in the wilder portion of the country. He was riding in a general southwestern direction when he came upon a little valley over which wheeled and glided a veritable flock of buzzards, startled reluctantly at his approach. On the wind came a stench of rotting flesh.

Entering the valley at a lope, he came upon a scene of slaughter. Fully fifty steers lay dead in the vale. He stopped near the first and frowned down on the carcass. All of the animals had been skinned for their hides by somebody, and the flesh abandoned to the vultures.

This was not peculiar. There were too many animals for hard-riding cowboys to bury, and hides should certainly be salvaged. The odd thing about the matter was the manner of death which had overtaken this stock. As he rode from carcass to carcass Hank observed that every one of them had been shot. From one bare skull which the vultures had already denuded of flesh he retrieved a slightly flattened lead slug. It was a bullet from a .30-30 rifle as near as Hank could judge.

He examined the hole in the skull thoughtfully. So the cattlemen had been right about the slaughter of cattle. Somebody had deliberately killed more than fifty steers in this one spot and left them to rot. But who? Had it been sheepmen? And who had stripped the dead beeves of their hides?

PUTTING the slug in his breast pocket with his tobacco sack, Hank remounted and rode onward. With a flapping of heavy wings the buzzards settled back down to their feast. Soberly the young Texan rode out of the valley of death.

So sparsely settled was this country that he ran across no signs of human habitation. He knew that the Moss Tiernan spread was somewhere south of him; and southwest lay the Tumbling J.

Over to the east and southeast lay the sheep spreads. Southwest of Elkhorn to the Rosebud Mountains was contested land, the land that Steve Reese had ridden safely across only to be ambushed in the hills themselves.

Hank was deep in speculation of these things as he made for a likely-looking gap which indicated a good pass across the Muggles Ridge to Tumbling J range. Muggles Creek, where Steve Reese had fallen in with Shorty Johnson and his fellow line camp rider, was farther north, but Hank realized that he was cutting across his superior's trail at some point.

The gap proved to be a natural saddle which led southwest across the range. Not being thoroughly familiar with the country, Hank discovered as he rode down into the lowlands that he had overshot his mark, coming out south of the Tumbling J. As he drew rein to orient himself he saw a cloud of dust moving rapidly up from the

direction of the stagecoach trail.

This resolved itself into a band of horsemen. Already having had some experience with the short temper of the men on this range, the young Texan turned his bronc toward a thicket of mountain laurel and scrub cedars, electing to disappear from view rather than ride on out of the sheltering hills onto the flats. Finding a spot where he could gaze down on the wide sweep of valley without exposing himself, Hank took out his field-glasses and focused them on the band of riders.

As they emerged in the van of their own dust cloud he made out that there must have been fully a dozen of them, and they were dusty and tired; their horses looked hard-ridden. A young chap seemed to be leading them, but this was hard to judge, for their features were not clearly distinguishable. As they swept on by, heading for where Hank took the home spread of the Jackson outfit to be, he was able to decipher the brand on a couple of the horses—a slanted letter J. Most of the riders had canvas sacks tied across the cantles.

Satisfied, he put away his glasses and remounted. Spurring his bronc down the sloping terrain, he urged the animal into a gallop and cut diagonally across country to intercept them. He was seen almost instantly, and the band deployed and swung over to meet him.

"Halloo," Hank yelled cheerily. "Tumblin' J boys? I'm headin' for yore place."

Somebody shouted something unintelligible, and Hank rode on to find himself suddenly surrounded by a ring of horsemen and face to face with a hard-eyed young fellow who would have been nice-looking had he not been so grim of countenance.

"What's yore name, stranger?" demanded this man in a curt tone as the entire group came to a standstill of snorting horses and creaking saddle leather.

"Hank Ball, from Omaha," replied Hank, grinning, although instantly alert to the fact that all was not well. "What's yores?"

"I'll ask 'em; you just answer 'em," clipped the grim-eyed young fellow. "But, if yuh don't know, I'm Andy Jackson of the Tumblin' J. Where d'yuh come from so sudden outa them hills?"

HANK pushed back his hat and flipped the sweat from his forehead with his crooked forefinger. His glance traveled all about him at the forbidding-looking faces. They looked as if they would like to bite his head off. Hank liked a fight himself, but his job was to conciliate the cattle element, not to antagonize them.

"I jest come down from the T K spread," he replied easily. "I drifted too far south it looks like. I was headin' for the Tumblin' J."

"Why?" demanded Jackson, his voice still hard and flat.

"Why not?" countered Hank in surprise. "I'm a stranger here from Omaha, and I want to look around before I buy a section of land from Senator Kemp. I'm thinkin' of settlin' here."

"With what?" demanded an oldish-looking man to Jackson's left.

"I got some registered Herefords on the way from Chicago," Hank answered him. "Why do yuh ask?"

"Hell, Tom," said another rider, "at least he ain't no sheepman."

"Say!" snorted Hank indignantly. "Jest what is all this?"

"Trouble!" Jackson assured him harshly. "Early this mornin' Jim Cluett's hoss come home, followed by a mule from Murphy's stable in Elkhorn. Jim went to Elkhorn yestiddy on business for me. When he didn't come home last night, and his saddleless hoss come in this mornin', we set

out to look for him. We been all the way to town and combed the range clean to the foothills of the Rosebuds without findin' a trace of him. Some damn' sheepman has drygulched him! And that, hombre, is why I'm questionin' every jasper we meet up with."

This was certainly an earful for the redhead. He seemed to have stumbled upon the information Steve Reese wanted and a lot more. So the dead man's name had been Jim Cluett, and he had gone to Elkhorn on business for Andy Jackson. And he had been a rider on the Tumbling J spread.

"Uh-huh." Hank nodded thoughtfully. "I heard they was cattle and sheep trouble brewin'. How about me ridin' on in to yore ranch with yuh and talkin' things over? Mebbe I can help."

"I was figgerin' on yore company," stated Jackson drily. "Let's ride, boys."

CHAPTER XIII

Accused

ON leaving the Kemp ranch Hank Ball had gathered from Steve Reese a concise account of things. Now, in retrospect, it didn't look as if the older man had been any too smart in turning the mule loose with the Tumbling J bronc, or in keeping the dead man's rifle. There would have to be some tall explaining or lying. This young Jackson was crazy mad. Thirty minutes in his company conclusively proved that to the redhead. Hank thrived on trouble, but he could see that Andy Jackson could supply an overdose.

Discreetly Hank Ball refrained from any mention of Reese's presence on the T K, otherwise frankly answering every question put to him. By the time the band rode up to the Tumbling J horse corral he had satisfied the young rancher's curiosity about himself, and Jackson's attitude had softened somewhat. Appraising him, Hank could see that the young fellow was in dire need of good advice as well as a confidant.

Hank took his saddle roll from his saddle and followed the owner into the main house. Jackson indicated a spare bunk in the long sleeping room used by the men, and the redhead carelessly dumped his roll on the blankets and followed on to the living room.

"About this range trouble," Hank said. "I come through a valley on the other side of the mountain that was full of dead cattle which had been skinned. Whose were they, yuh know?"

"Yes," said young Jackson brittlely. "Thirteen was mine, ten was Moss Tiernan's, and the balance was Thad Kemp's. We found 'em the same day they was shot. We skinned 'em to save the hides, but we never caught the dirty sons that killed 'em. I know who it was—Bill Elwood! But Thad Kemp objected to ridin' over to his place to collect damages. The heaviest loser—and he hemmed and hawed like he was scared. But I nearly got Elwood yestiddy mornin' east of Elkhorn."

"Mebbe Kemp was scared," suggested Hank.

Andy Jackson spat into the fireplace and snorted. "That old ringtail ain't scared of nothin', but he's turned plumb peacemaker since he's got to legislatin'. Elsie, now, she favored havin' a show-down with the dang woollies without lettin' things ride on and pile up like this. And now I've lost another man today."

"But yuh don't know for shore that the sheepmen got Cluett," Hank pointed out. "Yuh ain't positive they shot yore cattle, either."

"The hell I ain't! I admit that I didn't see 'em, but I saw that gang of outlaws raid Judge Tankard's court. I saw Bill Elwood stand up for the rustlers. I seen 'em shoot down my dad. And the one feller somebody killed in their bunch was a sheepherder from over toward Lamar. That's enough for me. If Jim Cluett ain't heard from by night, I'm gatherin' all the cattlemen together and ridin' into sheep territory on business."

"Tell me all about it," Hank invited in a friendly way.

An invitation to talk into a sympathetic ear was all Andy Jackson needed. And Hank Ball got a full picture of the course of events, colored, of course, from the Tumbling J man's viewpoint.

He decided, as Jackson talked, that the young fellow was honest in his convictions and straightforward in his dealings. But, if so, why was Jim Cluett one of his riders? Why had he been sent to town? Why had the man attempted to kill Steve Reese? If Jackson was not implicated in this twist, the answer lay in Elkhorn.

"Yuh talk about the disappointin' way Senator Kemp is actin'," commented the redhead at the conclusion of the bitter recital. "Did yuh ever hear of any other interests he might have in this country outside of cattle?" He was thinking of Kemp's railroad talk.

ANDY JACKSON looked at him queerly, his dark brown eyes somber with thought. Then he shook his head.

"Nothin' only his politics. He is tryin' to develop Montana, and I admire him for that."

"Yuh mentioned his daughter several times. She shore is pretty. Ain'tcha kinda interested in her?"

Andy flushed slightly.

"There was a time when Dad and the senator thought we'd get sweet on each other," he admitted, "but Elsie and me are only good friends. She's kinda sweet on Ted Harper, but her dad don't know it."

"Harper? Oh, yeah, the sheriff. What about him, by the way? Ain't he gettin' active about this trouble? Ain't he doin' anything? I heard he was s'posed to be over this way yestiddy to see Kemp, or somebody."

"I ain't seen 'im," denied Jackson. "If he was comin' over here I reckon it was to call on Elsie, not her dad. He's new, and I guess Gunbarrel Shaw put the fear of Gawd in him. Naw, he ain't doin' nothin'."

Hank was about to ask another question when a sly, slinky sort of sound from the big sleeping room caught his attention. Jackson heard it too, and glanced toward the door. With one bound Hank was at the threshold.

At the far side of the bunkroom, bending over Hank's bed, was a lanky individual in blue levis and a red-and-white calfskin vest, busily going through his saddle roll. Hank's right hand flashed down and up with a six-shooter.

"Hold on, feller!" he bit out. "Yuh're dressin' in the wrong pew."

The fellow whirled about. In one hand he held Hank's field-glasses. He was a swarthy complexioned man with snaky black eyes that looked as beady as shoe buttons. There was a faint snarl on his face like that of a cornered fox.

"Dawson!" exclaimed Jackson.

"Is he one of yore men?" Hank asked without taking his eyes from the man.

"Yeah," admitted Jackson. "Don't shoot him. What the hell's the idea, Dawson?"

"Mesquite" Dawson relaxed at the

sound of his employer's voice.

"I was jest goin' by to my bunk," he explained in a sullen voice, "and I knocked the saddle roll with my leg and almost dropped out these here spy glasses."

"Yuh got a good leg, feller," Hank said drily. "Knocked the roll wide open. Is this the way yuh treat yore guests, Jackson?"

"Hell, no!" roared the rancher, flushing angrily. "What the devil do yuh mean by this, Dawson?"

"I jest wanted to see what I could learn about that feller," snarled the culprit. "Yuh know yuh told us boys to examine all strangers, Andy."

"Not that way," said Jackson coldly. "And I'm takin' care of Ball myself."

"Well, what's he doin' with spy-glasses?" demanded Dawson.

"What's wrong with 'em?" snapped Hank. "I always use 'em in strange country. Since yuh've took so much liberty, go on and shake out the rest of my stuff while we watch yuh."

Dawson showed signs of indecision.

"Go on!" repeated Hank, his blue eyes narrowing. "Paw yore way through that roll so's Mr. Jackson and me can both see what yuh find. Get busy."

LIKE a pettish child the swarthy fellow did so. Nothing foreign to a cattleman's kit came to light.

"Satisfied I ain't carryin' mutton, or something, now?" demanded Hank bitingly.

"Yeah," growled Dawson. "I guess I made a mistake."

"A bad one," agreed Hank. "March to the door."

Dawson licked his lips, eyed the relentless-looking six-shooter and complied. Hank stepped behind him. At the door leading out of the house he suddenly sheathed his gun and grabbed the prowler by the collar and the slack of the pants before the fellow could do more than utter one squawk of alarmed surprise. Then, with a muscular heave, Hank sent him sprawling on all fours out on the porch.

"The next time I'll set fire to yore shirt-tail," he promised.

There was a roar of laughter from the men outside who had seen the exit. Dawson picked himself up, pulled a splinter out of his hand, and shambled away, scowling.

"I don't think," said Jackson, "yuh oughta done that."

"Yuh don't? Well, I'm gettin' tired of meddlesome rannies. Up at the T K this mornin' I had the same experience. A pair of shorthorns named Tarp and Ackley went through the same act. Is this a Montana custom?"

"No, and I apologize. Tarp and Ackley, yuh say? That's funny."

"What's funny about it?"

"Kemp hired them about the same time I hired Cluett and Dawson—a month ago."

"Hmmm — that was before the trouble at Elkhorn, then," mused Hank. "Say, what did yuh send Cluett to town for, anyhow?"

"Supplies," Jackson said curtly. "We had a brush with Elwood yestiddy mornin' like I said, and we brought some of the supplies home in saddlebags today."

"So I noticed. I thought that was a funny way to load down saddle hosses to go out scoutin' for a lost man."

"We killed two birds with one stone," explained Jackson.

"Shore," Hank nodded. "How was Cluett gonna bring all that stuff?"

"By stagecoach. The Thorpe line runs west not five miles south of here. He was goin' to leave his hoss in town and go after it later. I sent a couple of men with a wagon to meet the stage yestiddy afternoon, but Cluett and none of the supplies wasn't on it. I figgered he'd stayed over one more

day and would get here this afternoon. But when his hoss showed up early this mornin' without him, we took the mule back to town and started huntin' Cluett. Found out the mule had been rented to a prospector feller by the name of Reese."

"Oh, yeah," said Hank. "That feller's up at the T K now. He was lost. Said his mule got away from him. I reckon—"

That was as far as Hank got. Half a dozen of the Tumbling J hands, headed by Mesquite Dawson, were coming into the room, guns in hand.

"Andy, us boys been talkin'," declared Dawson hotly, "and we've come to the conclusion this feller's spyin' on us for the sheepmen. He ain't got no business with spy-glasses, and we been listenin' through the window. He's been askin' yuh all sorts of questions, pumpin' yuh for information, and yuh're simple enough to let him. Are yuh plumb blind? Can't yuh see what he's doin'?"

"YUH'RE a liar, Dawson," said Hank coldly. "Now that yuh've brought it up, I'm warnin' Jackson against yuh in particular. Yuh're a sneak and a troublemaker. That feller, Cluett, was yore pardner, and the pair of yuh was up to some—"

"*Was?*" exclaimed Andy Jackson sharply. All of his old suspicion flared up anew, and Hank realized that he had made a slip. "Yuh said 'was'! Then, by Gawd, Jim Cluett *is* dead—and you know it, Ball!"

"Hold on!" Hank cried quickly. "How could I know that? I've never seen this Cluett feller in my life. I was just follerin' yore own reasonin', Jackson, and—"

"Yuh're plumb right, Dawson," Jackson said tersely. "I'm a fool! Grab him, men! We'll make him talk."

With angry shouts the hot-headed ranch hands surged forward to do violence. Swayed by one man's sly talk and another's blind desire for vengeance, they were not in the mood to listen to arguments. Realizing that his very life might be hanging now in the balance, Hank Ball took the only course left open to him. He whirled and dived head first through the window.

Guns roared and hot lead followed him, caressing his cheeks and whispering familiarly of violent death. Still scrambling on all fours, the redhead fairly wormed his way around the corner of the house out of sight and rose to his feet and legged it like mad for the horse corral. It was an unpleasant feeling to be in the position of a clay pigeon and not be able to fight back.

And, unless it was to do battle with Dawson, Hank Ball knew he didn't want to fight back. To kill or wound any of these men would only crystallize their suspicions of him and fan the flames of range war all the higher.

To his vast relief he saw his horse still saddled where he had left it when he had entered the house with Jackson. A number of other mounts were loose in the corral but unsaddled. Hank went up over the rump of his horse like a boy playing leap-frog and landed in the saddle with a thud that made the animal quiver. Reaching under the horse's neck for the trailing reins, Hank spurred him into startled motion.

He wheeled and fled southward along the corral fence in full gallop just as his angry pursuers poured around the corner of the house. They fanned out and emptied their six-shooters after him. But this was a futile gesture. By the time they ran to the corral and saddled up, their quarry was out of sight.

Andy Jackson called off the chase.

"Let 'im go, fellers," he said grimly. "We'll get him later. Let's ride over to see Moss Tiernan. We're gonna clean out the whole nest of sheepherd-

ers pronto. I'm through playin' around. Bushwhackin' Jim Cluett was the last straw."

Mesquite Dawson smiled to himself. Then he had a sobering thought. What if the red-headed stranger had had something to do with Cluett's disappearance, after all? Maybe that was why he had fled so precipitately. He had known that Dawson's accusations were founded on fact!

And the villainous Tumbling J hand knew a moment of sickening fear. What if Jim Cluett were dead? Hank Ball had tried to warn Andy Jackson against Dawson. For what? What did the redhead know?

HANK BALL, galloping southward, was troubled with reflections of his own.

"Well, I made a nice hash of that," he said, chagrined. "Anyway, I found out what Doc wants to know. The only thing to do now is ride on to Elkhorn and give him the information. Oughta make it before night."

By the time he reached the stagecoach trail he had satisfied himself that there was no pursuit. He now had the figure of Mesquite Dawson to add to the sinister pair, Tarp and Ackley, for Doc Reese's investigations.

CHAPTER XIV

A Striped Shirt

ELKHORN being its next stop, the eastbound stage rumbled along with the lengthening shadows. Due in town by suppertime, the driver was lustily urgir g his team to cover the last ten miles. There were only t w o passengers, but this lack was more than compensated for by the contents of the heavy chest in the boot.

Fifty thousand dollars in gold! It was the monthly shipment from the Treasure Lode mine to the railroad at Lamar. The two guards were on the alert, but nothing had happened to arouse their suspicions along the entire trip. Even the Indians were peaceful and quiet. Were it not for this cattle and sheep trouble on the Elkhorn range, everything would have been splendid. But that business was no concern of the stage line.

They were just ten miles from Elkhorn, and supper would be waiting. So Driver Thelan whipped up his horses while the passengers drowsed and the pair of guards yawned. Then, as the coach rounded the side of a small butte and hit a slight upgrade which slowed the pace, catastrophe overtook it.

Without warning there sounded the sharp *crack-crack* of a pair of rifles. One of the guards grunted, t h e n sagged forward and down over the startled driver's shoulder. Thelan, turning his head at the sound, found himself staring into a dead face which had a third eye in the middle of the forehead. The guard had been shot through the head.

Even as Thelan stared in horror, the other guard jerked erect, let out a strangled cry, and pitched headlong from the coach to the roadside. Instant realization came to the frightened driver and, supporting the dead guard on his shoulder because he didn't have time to do anything about that, he emitted a hoarse yell and lashed out his whip at his laboring team.

The animals jumped at the sting of the whip and lunged against the traces. The trail had narrowed here and there was no turning back or swinging around. Knowing that the shots had come from the brush-lined ledge just slightly above the top of the

coach, there was nothing Thelan could do but try to run for it.

He had never heard of a hold-up in which the bandits didn't command the coach to halt.

He did his best to get through the ambush. It was useless. As the horses picked up speed and it looked as if there might be a fair chance, twice more a rifle cracked viciously. The leaders of the team went plunging to their knees, wantonly shot to death. The others piled up in a kicking, squealing snarl, bringing the coach to a dead stop.

Knowing that he was already as good as dead, Thelan dropped whip and reins and grabbed the dead guard's rifle. He saw smoke curling up from a clump of shrubbery on the left ledge, and slammed the gun to his shoulder for a quick aim. The second rifle of the mysterious attackers spoke this time, and Thelan felt his chest cave in with a terrific burst of agony that passed almost as soon as it came.

With a tired sigh, he lowered the gun and leaned forward.

He continued to lean forward until he toppled from his seat over the footboard and down across the tongue of the stagecoach where a frantically struggling horse kicked him in the head, splitting the skull wide open. But Driver Thelan never knew it. He was already dead.

Yells and startled cries came from the two passengers within the coach just as two men with smoking rifles rose to their feet on the ledge of rock. Grinning in fiendish glee, the two bandits stood there and shot down the brace of passengers without mercy. One poor devil, an aged prospector who had made his little pile and was at last on his way back to Illinois to spend his last years with his daughter and grandchildren, clambered out of the coach with his hands high above his head.

"DON'T shoot, boys!" he called frantically. "I surrender plumb peaceful. Yuh can have everything I—"

The bandit with the broken nose chuckled aloud as he shot smack dab at the oldster's watch chain. As the passenger sagged in pained surprise and gripped at his abdomen with both toil-worn and leathery hands, the murderer callously pumped shot after shot into him until his jerking, twitching body hit the ground and lay still.

The other passenger, witness of this wanton murder, tumbled out the opposite side of the coach and attempted to run a zigzag course for the shelter of a copse of trees. The result was pitiful. The first bandit, the man with the square shoulders and gray mustache, picked him off like a jackrabbit, laughing as the fellow leaped high in the air and fell, kicking, his scream of agony cut off in thin air.

"Make a clean job of it, Slim," said the mustached man, reloading his rifle and methodically spraying the already dead bodies with bullet after bullet. "No witnesses to this job."

"Like shootin' fish in a rain-barrel," grunted the other.

It was ghastly. Then, as one of the coach horses finally broke free of its harness and started away at a dead run, the two ruthless executioners turned their attention to the animals. Wantonly they shot the remaining four horses to death.

The slaughter completed, they turned to survey the surrounding country. Not a living thing moved in the distance. Satisfied, the terrible pair went back into the brush and came forth leading two saddle horses and two pack animals. Making their way down to the trail, they proceeded to carry their strange robbery to an even stranger conclusion.

With knives they slashed the harness until it was ruined. With axes they proceeded to reduce the stage-

coach itself to splinters. This done, they rifled the bodies of their victims. Then, working as methodically as though they had all the time in the world, they went through the mail sack and the express box, tossing the unwanted papers and letters into the wrecked coach.

At last they broke open the gold shipment. Their eyes glowing with cupidity, they proceeded to pack the bullion upon their two spare horses, making about a hundred-pound load for each. This done, they committed the final act of sabotage. They set fire to the coach.

Waiting to make sure that there was no chance of the flames going out, they gathered up all their equipment and set out, each leading a pack animal, northward into the gathering dusk of the hills. Behind them they left only a blazing fire leaping up in the twilight like a baleful red eye, sole witness of a deed of horror and vandalism that outrivaled many an Indian attack upon a wagon train.

* * * * *

RIDING along in the dusk, Hank Ball became aware of the reddish glow of fire long before he rounded the shoulder of the butte as he followed the stage trail. Curious as to who could be camping along the trail in this barren expanse, he urged his mount onward at a quicker pace.

He intended to halt at the butte and reconnoiter cautiously, but found this unnecessary. There was no sound save that of the dying fire, no moving figures save those of shadows called into a semblance of life by the glowing and flickering tongues of flame.

The Association man approached warily and halted in utter dismay at the scene before his eyes. In the center lay the charred remains of the stagecoach, surrounded by the scattered forms of five men and six horses —a bivouac of the dead. Nothing was left of the equipage itself save the iron wheel rims and a few twisted metal parts.

"My Gawd!" whispered the redhead, appalled by the brutal horror of the stark scene. "One of Thorpe's stagecoaches. Indians musta attacked 'em."

He dismounted in the gloom and began an examination. Carefully he circled the site. He surveyed the bodies of men and horses, saw the mark of axes on metal parts. His keen eyes deciphered the various tracks and made the general plan of disastrous action plain to him. He trailed the attackers back to the ledge where they had lain in ambush to strike without warning, located their final tracks heading north into the hills.

"Not Indians," he said soberly. "Indians don't kill hosses—they take 'em. Somebody—the marks of two men—plumb wiped out the eastbound stage. This will cost Howard Thorpe several thousand dollars. Now, who could of done it? And why?"

That the massacre had occurred just a short time ago was evidenced by the still dying fire and the fact that the bodies were not yet cold. Circling wider, Hank studied the tracks leading northward. He squatted above the marks in a soft piece of ground, cupping a lighted match in his hands as he examined the ground and reflected.

"Four hosses, but only two men," he mused. "Uummm—pack animals. So there musta been a good haul of some kind on the stage. All four hosses carryin' pretty good loads. Let's see—they's gold mines over toward Butte. That's it! It has to be —gold! But why wipe everybody out and burn the stagecoach? Sorrel hoss, this needs lookin' into. We'll meet Doc Reese in Elkhorn tomorrow, after all."

Mounting his patiently waiting bronc, he headed north along the trail taken by the outlaw killers. Burning with a deep anger at the perpetrators

of this dastardly crime, giving no thought to the fact that he was penetrating into wild mountain country without even a blanket—he had had to escape from the Tumbling J ranch without his saddle roll—knowing the odds would be at least two to one if he overtook the killers, he rode on.

When complete darkness dropped down to enfold the range in its soft but smothering embrace, Hank Ball halted and made a dry camp while he waited for the moon to rise. He was taking no chances of losing the trail he was following like a grim, avenging Nemesis.

Under the full moonlight he was able to proceed without difficulty until the trail reached higher ground and led through a maze of rocky gullies and small canyons. Here, much as he chafed against the delay, he halted again beside a little stream and waited for morning. With the coming of daylight, as soon as it was bright enough for him to read the ground from his saddle, he was on his way, following the raiders deep into the mountains.

AT first he marveled at the outlaws' indifference to the trail they left. Then, as the ground grew rockier and the signs grew harder to decipher, he ceased to wonder. Not expecting an expert tracker to be on their trail so soon, with the first rain or storm sure to wipe out all signs of their passing, and with almost the whole of Montana's mountainous country ahead in which to lose themselves, no wonder the pair of outlaws were careless.

In the wildest part of this country, he ascended the jaws of a canyon. He was on the verge of stopping to consider things as the gorge grew deeper instead of shallower, as a well behaved canyon should do as it led upward into the mountains, when he heard a crackling sound above him.

Startled, the redhead looked up. High on the cliff above and just ahead of him a huge boulder was just toppling over to gather momentum and crash to the bottom of the gorge. With a sharp exclamation, he reined up his sorrel. Had he not heard that crackling sound he would have ridden forward just in time to be crushed to death.

The huge rock fell to the floor of the gorge with a thunderous majesty that awakened the echoes. Smaller rocks and rubble showered down after it, raising a blinding cloud of dust. But Hank's keen eyes had already glimpsed the flash of a striped shirt up above before the wearer ducked back out of sight. Wheeling his bronc, he spurred like mad for the dubious safety of a cross canyon some fifty yards back.

The thought of that queerly striped shirt was in his mind. He had seen it somewhere recently. It was an odd sort of thing, the stripes going around in wide yellow circles instead of running up and down.

And suddenly he had it! It wasn't a shirt; it was a lightweight jersey that slipped on over the head. And Slim Tarp, the T K rider, had been wearing it yesterday!

CHAPTER XV

Prisoner in the Cabin

SO Slim Tarp of the T K Ranch was one of the killers he was trailing! It followed logically that Tennessee Ackley must be the other.

Hank Ball dashed into the side canyon, his eyes searching the sides and the depths. To his pleased surprise he saw that the

side next the cliff from whence the great boulder had come presented a shelving shoulder which constituted a sort of sloping ramp that led to the top.

Only a madman or a rider with nerves of steel would have been crazy enough to attempt to ride a horse up that precarious incline. But Hank Ball was both. Even as his eyes traced the possibilities of that natural ramp to the brush-crowned top he was already urging his sturdy sorrel toward the crumbling steep slope.

The gallant animal snorted at the task set him, but he did not falter in his stride. He leaped up the first few feet of the shoulder and then, as the shale and rock showered and slipped from beneath his flying hoofs, with a grunt he squatted close to the ground and practically clawed his frantic way up the slipping and sliding ramp, each moment in grave danger of going sideward off the trail.

Lightly but carefully Hank Ball sat, not in the saddle, but virtually in his stirrups, riding the bronc's shoulders, swaying properly to one side or the other to balance his steed's scrambling pace. He gave the horse his head, offering no other help beyond coaxing him along in a low but encouraging voice. And all the while he knew he was in imminent danger of being shot from above or of having another boulder rolled down to sweep him to destruction.

Nothing happened. True, he was more than a hundred yards away from the spot where his would-be slayer should be standing, but when the fellow looked over and saw that his attempt had been unsuccessful, surely he would begin searching for sight of his victim.

There was no sound save the soughing of the wind through the hills, the murmur of the little stream babbling over the boulders in its rocky bed, and the soft noise of the rain of gravel his horse's hoofs were peppering down on the leaves of the vines and trees which were now below him in the side canyon.

It seemed a century, but it couldn't have been more than three minutes from the instant he charged the bottom of the treacherous slope until he reached the top. Just as the laboring animal reached the crest and planted his fore hoofs on the plateaulike top, the crumbly edge of the cliff gave way under his weight.

The horse grunted as he slipped—he was too winded to squeal—and started to slide backward. He would have toppled to the floor of the canyon some hundred feet below, carrying himself and his rider to death, if Hank Ball hadn't leaped from his saddle in that instant, dug his heels into the ground, and heaved hard on the saddlehorn.

With a mad scramble of hoofs, the noble horse responded to this sudden lift, and came off the end of the ramp in a flurry of motion to quiet down and stand, trembling, beside his master.

"Whew!" Hank murmured aloud as he patted the beast's shoulder with one hand and grasped the butt of his six-shooter with the other.

He was in a cedar and oak thicket, a growth of vegetation that completely masked the lip of the cliff and the hazardous trail he had climbed.

Leaving his horse tied to a sapling, he pushed cautiously through the thicket. As the growth thinned he found himself directly at the rear of a one-room cabin built of rough-hewn logs. And of all the things he might have encountered on the top of a mesa in the wilds of Montana, a cabin was the last thing he expected.

THERE was no window in the back, and he parted the underbrush carefully after looking both ways. Five swift, running steps took him to the rear wall. Peering cau-

tiously around the corner, he saw only the side wall in which was a single window. Beyond the house was a tangle of wild grass and brush with a footpath winding through it toward the lip of the cliff beneath which he had almost met destruction.

As he crouched at the corner and listened he heard the clinking of bits and the slow, heavy tread of horse hoofs. Then, from within the silent cabin, came what sounded like a muffled groan. There was no other sound, no smoke, even, from the rock chimney. Still fiercely angry at the attempt on his life, Hank hastily drew back and ran to the other rear corner of the cabin.

It was the same—an expanse of rough cabin wall with one window in it. Emboldened and with a feeling there was need for haste, he ran along the side of the cabin until he reached the front corner. The sounds of horses were approaching closer, although he still saw no one.

Two small windows were in the front of the cabin, and a solid door of oak planks. Again came the sound of a stifled groan. Acting on impulse, he darted to the door and tried the latch. The door creaked open on its crude strap hinges. The sound carried through the thin air, like the sigh of a ghost escaping from the black interior of the house.

There was an instant shout of alarm from the direction of the cliff, and two horsemen came galloping into view. Slim Tarp and Tennessee Ackley of the T K spread!

"Hell and damnation!" bellowed Tarp at sight of Hank Ball. "He got away and flew up here, Ten."

Tennessee Ackley wasted no time in words. Already his six-shooter was blazing as he charged forward. As the first slug buried itself in the door frame beside his head Hank Ball leaped into the cabin and flattened himself against the wall on the left of the opening. He had no chance to close the door, which had swung open the other way.

"He's inside!" yelled Tarp unnecessarily. "Hell, Ten, we've gotta get 'im quick!"

"Follow 'im!" grated Ackley harshly. "We'll fight it out inside. He can't git away."

One swift glimpse about the single room was all that Hank Ball got before the pair of killers flung themselves from their mounts and charged the gaping door, six-guns blazing. There was a coal-oil lamp hanging in a gimbal overhead, a heavy home-made table about the middle of the room with a single chair behind it and some papers, pen, ink, a rubber stamp, and a book on it. A rough bunk was built into one corner, and a black bundle of some kind rested on it.

"Take the left!" ordered Ackley at the door. "Jest keep shootin'! I'll take the right."

And the pair crashed across the threshold, desperate in their reckless eagerness, the older and more deadly man swinging to his right as he entered, firing even before he saw Hank Ball.

Tennessee Ackley's first blind shot tugged at Hank's sleeve. His next would have got the Texan. But there was no next. Ball's six-shooter roared a shade later than Ackley's, and the treacherous T K rider grunted and went down as if he had tripped across a log on the threshold.

Slim Tarp, following closely behind him, twisted sideward to fire at the flash of Hank Ball's gun and triggered one shot that put a hole through the redhead's Stetson. Hank had not drawn his left gun, with which he was almost as proficient as with his right. He was leaning against the wall, bracing himself with his left hand as he fired with his right. His second bullet went over the falling Ackley's head and entered Tarp's chest.

"THAT makes me and Doc brothers," Hank grunted as he felt the tug of Slim Tarp's bullet going through his hat.

He remained rigid, his eyes watching with the steady gaze of a hawk. Slim Tarp swung back around toward the face of the open door, put out his left hand, leaned against the casing as if he were tired, and then crumpled down to pitch lifelessly across the body of his companion.

Then, and then only did Hank Ball move. He pushed himself erect and bent over to examine the precious pair. There wasn't any use. It had been almost pointblank range. Both T K riders were buzzard meat.

"Well, that's too bad," soliloquized the victor. "I'd shore liked to ask them rannies some questions."

He reholstered his gun and turned to survey the interior of the cabin more closely. Again came that queer sound, and his eyes sought the black bundle on the corner bunk. It was the figure of a man, tied and gagged.

It was the work of but a moment to draw his barlow and cut the bonds of the captive, revealing the congested features of a normally pale man of about thirty years of age. The prisoner was clad in well cut black broadcloth which was rumpled and soiled. He looked as if he had been tied up for some time, appearing almost in a state of exhaustion.

His hands and feet were stiff and cold from lack of circulation, but his black eyes stared intelligently into those of his liberator. It was several minutes before he could speak.

"Well, brother," said Hank, smiling as he chafed the other's hands, "looks like yuh've been hogtied for quite a spell. Lucky I happened to be ridin' up this street."

"Y-yes, thanks," articulated the rescued man hoarsely. "I've been a prisoner here—two days—I think. Heard yuh outside—thought it was them two skunks comin' back. Are they dead?"

"Plumb," Hank grimly nodded. "Sometimes I shoot too straight. Who are yuh, pard?"

"Ted Harper," was the answer. "I'm the sheriff."

"Huh? So that's why yuh been missin'."

"Have I been missin'? I didn't think I was that important. How did yuh know about it?"

"Heard yuh had left Elkhorn to visit Senator Kemp, but yuh never showed up. My name's Hank Ball—from Omaha—cattleman. Who captured yuh?"

"That pair yuh jest killed," said Harper, attempting to get up but sinking back.

"Is there gonna be any trouble with yuh over 'em?" Hank inquired as he assisted the sheriff to a more comfortable position.

"No," said Harper. "It was self-defense. I saw it. And even if it hadn't been, it would be justifiable. I had reason to believe that they come back here at daylight to kill me. But they seemed mighty busy with a shovel and a pickax all mornin'. Diggin' me a deep grave, I reckon."

"Why? D'yuh know who they was?"

"Yes. That's why I think they was aimin' to kill me. They rode for the T K outfit. I recognized 'em. That's why they couldn't let me live."

"Right." Hank nodded again. "Tarp and Ackley. But why did they jump yuh up?"

Purposely he kept from the sheriff the news of the stage massacre, waiting to see if Harper had any guilty knowledge of it.

"That," said Harper grimly, "is what I want to know. I was on my way to see Senator Kemp about callin' a mass meetin' of sheep and cattlemen to settle things peaceful. Tell me how you fit in."

WHILE Harper staggered about the cabin to exercise his half-paralyzed body, Hank examined the items on the table while he talked. He gave the brief facts, up to date, that Harper would have learned for himself.

"Yuh want to go on to the T K, or back to town with me?" he concluded. "Do yuh know jest where we are, anyhow?"

"Not exactly. I was ridin' north from the Boxed M when them two skunks jumped me and knocked me out. When I woke up, I was there on that bunk. Damn, but my legs and arms ache!"

"Looks like somebody was gonna write letters here," observed Hank, picking up the stamp and examining it. "Hey! This is the seal of the Cattle Growers' Union! What's it doin' here, d'yuh suppose?"

He inked it and stamped down on a sheet of paper. Both of them stared at the impression. Harper looked sick.

"That's what it is," he said, surprised. "Looks like they were fixin' to write letters in the name of the Association."

"Who's the secretary of the outfit?"

"I don't know," reflected Harper. "Frank Jackson and Thad Kemp was the organizers. They never told me much about it."

"This place looks like it might have been a trapper's cabin," puzzled Hank. "It shore ain't a line camp—no place around these badlands to run cattle. Reckon we better take this stuff with us. . . . What'll we do about them two coyotes?"

"Take 'em to town on their hosses," Harper decided. "I'll go with yuh. Yuh said Thad Kemp would be in town. I can ask him some questions there."

"Which reminds me—that feller Reese said yore sister is waitin' for yuh at Elkhorn."

"My sister?" exclaimed Harper, turning pale. "My Gawd, this is no place for her!"

"Looks like it ain't right healthy for lots of people," Hank opined drily. "Didn't yuh know she was comin'?"

Harper groaned. "I wrote her not to come more'n a week ago—right after the courtroom trouble. I guess she didn't get my letter. Come on, I can make it now if I can find my hoss. Let's get goin'!"

They found the T K horses used by the two outlaws, and the sheriff's mare tethered in a crude rope corral. While the sheriff led the animals back to the cabin, Hank scouted the mesa top. He found the "grave" the two bandits had been digging, but he wouldn't have, had he not been looking for it, so cleverly had they covered it.

Not knowing for sure just what they had looted from the stage, and still wanting to keep matters from Harper until the sheriff tipped his hand or satisfied him of his innocence, Hank did not disturb the spot. It became obvious, too, how he had come to be discovered.

In burying their loot on the plateau, the two villains had chanced to look down into the canyon and had plainly seen him riding along. Either they had figured he was following them and was about to catch them with the loot and the kidnaped sheriff, or they had simply tried to kill him because he had called their hand the day before when they found Jim Cluett's rifle on Reese's horse, and were afraid of him.

So this was the line riding they had had to do! But it was incredible to think of Senator Thaddeus Kemp as a fiend who would send his men out to do murder and sabotage. Hank would have given much to have questioned the two outlaws about that terrible holdup, but it was too late. The unraveling of the ghastly mystery would

have to fall to Doc Reese's analytical mind.

RETURNING to the cabin, he helped the sheriff load the dead men across a pair of horses, gathered up the evidence from the table, and set out with Ted Harper for town. They found a safe descent down the north side of the mesa. Reaching lower ground, they headed for the stage line trail. And still Hank remained silent about the grisly thing which lay ahead of them. He wanted the sheriff to discover the tragedy for himself.

It was nearly noon when they reached the spot. It was Harper who pointed out the wheeling buzzards.

"More dead cattle, I suppose," he said bitterly. "Or mebbe sheep."

"I reckon," agreed Hank noncommittally.

As they rounded the shoulder of the butte, the Association man kept his eyes glued on the black-clad figure of the sheriff. Harper's surprise appeared to be genuine. He nearly fell off his horse.

"My Gawd!" he whispered as he took in the harrowing details. "Indians have attacked the stage!"

"Looks like," muttered the suddenly obtuse Hank.

But Harper corrected himself, as Hank had done the night before.

"No. Indians don't shoot hosses."

"Never heard of 'em doin' it," Hank agreed.

Harper dismounted and ran forward to examine the scene. Hank followed, waiting silently for the sheriff's reactions. They were not long in coming. Harper read the various signs almost as accurately as Hank had done the night before. Suddenly he straightened and whirled on his companion. His eyes were wide with speculation that slowly changed to positiveness.

"Ball!" he said tersely. "It was Ackley and Tarp! So that's why they kidnaped me—to get me outa the way! That's why . . . But I don't see—and you *knew!* You was follerin' 'em!"

"Yes," Ball admitted. "I knew. I was."

"And yuh didn't tell me!"

"No. I wanted to let yuh find it out for yoreself."

"But why? Why didn't yuh tell me? Do yuh doubt I'm the sheriff?"

"No. But hasn't it struck yuh yet that findin' yuh tied up there at the bandits' hide-out looked funny to me?"

The sheriff blinked his eyes and stared. At length a tired little smile appeared about his lips. He shrugged wearily.

"Yes," he slowly admitted. "I reckon that does look funny as hell. But I swear I was jest ridin' up to talk with Senator Kemp about the sheep and cattle war when them two—"

He broke off as full realization of the identity of the two killers dawned on him.

"Keep right on thinkin', Harper," admonished Hank Ball in a hard voice. "Yuh didn't tell me all yuh knew, either. Yuh didn't admit that this cattle union stamp and stuff I'm carryin' belongs to Thad Kemp, provin' he had been at that cabin where I found you."

HARPER'S face went deathly pale.

"Ball, I swear I didn't see Senator Kemp! I don't *know* that he was ever at that cabin. I only suspected—like you have. I—oh, my Gawd! Elsie! Elsie!"

"I reckon I can trust yuh to stand guard here while I ride on to Elkhorn for help," said the redhead evenly.

Harper's face was drawn with despair and grief as he answered.

"I'm a gambler, Ball, but the people of this country made me their sheriff, and I promised to do my duty. So help me, Gawd, I'll do it!"

He clenched his fists and stared along the deserted trail toward town. "I can't understand why somebody hasn't come along searchin' for this stage yet. It was due in Elkhorn last night at supper time. The westbound will be due along here in a couple of hours. This will cripple Howard Thorpe—especially if there was gold on this stage. He carries his own insurance, and he'll have to make everything good. Get goin', Ball. I'll be here when the undertaker comes."

CHAPTER XVI

A New Outlaw

CONFRONTED by the implacable sheep grower and his men, menaced by that rifle and a number of six-shooters, Dusty Trail was in about the tightest spot of his career, with a lynch rope looming at the end of the road. In the flickering lamplight — while Hank Ball was talking cattle with Andy Jackson, and Steve Reese was enjoying a late supper with Senator Kemp in the comparative luxury of the Stag Hotel—Dusty faced his crisis alone and unaided.

He could make a play for his guns and go to his death in a blaze of so-called glory, taking Bill Elwood and another man or two with him, but that was the last thing Steve Reese wanted. Besides, Dusty had learned enough to understand that the sheepmen were not to blame for their attitude. With Bass Marlowe and his gang committing acts of depredation against the sheepmen such as the raid planned for tonight, no wonder the woollie ranchers were up in arms.

It also followed that the same outlaw gang, or another, could have been slaughtering cattle and doing other things against the cattle growers in the name of the sheep ranchers. Dimly Trail grasped this astonishing theory. But why? What could be the reason for such a senseless brewing of range war? Who stood to gain?

Certainly not the men involved! Certainly not the outlaws. Bass Marlowe could have better luck devoting his talents to straight robberies and raids than by trying to stir up trouble between cattle and sheep factions. Could the man be so crazy for revenge against cattlemen that he would go to this much trouble to stir up war against them? Could he induce his gang to work with him in such a profitless enterprise?

Granting this wild premise, why would he do the same to the sheepmen? Bill Elwood had shown friendliness toward the rustler in Tankard's court.

It didn't dovetail at all. Of one thing Dusty was certain: Elwood might be badly mistaken in his ideas about the situation, but he was honest in his convictions and was not guilty of crookedness. It was a problem for Steve Reese to work out—if Dusty could only live to get this information to him.

As the cook advanced from the doorway to disarm him, and White Cloud, the breed, turned and ran toward the smithy shed for a rope, the cornered detective thought like lightning.

"Wait!" he cried tersely, halting the cook in his tracks by the ring of command in his voice. "Listen to me, Bill Elwood! I shot Jordan because he was tryin' to kill me! The reason? He jest told me that yore place is gonna be raided tonight. Today he took me up in the hills—not jest to visit yore sheep spread, but to give the raidin' signal to—"

"Shut up!" Elwood cut him off harshly. "I've already told yuh what would happen to yuh if yuh made a single misstep. I'll give yuh time to say yore prayers before we string yuh up. That's all. Go on, Watkins! Take his guns."

Dusty Trail sighed, and weighed his chances of escape without killing or being killed. He was fairly caught in a cul-de-sac where appearances were against him no matter what he said. Elwood would not believe his accusations against the dead Jordan.

And the entire truth, the revealing of his identity, instead of helping matters, would only damn him completely. To confess that he was actually a cattle detective would be the finishing touch to cap Elwood's already black anger and suspicion. And such a course might ruin Steve Reese's plans.

SOMEBODY had to make Elwood see the light, but that was impossible for Dusty Trail to do. His usefulness here was finished. Watkins, in a careful crouch, had resumed his sidling approach.

And it was at that stressful moment that there sounded a wild cry from the distant hillside, followed by the unmistakable *crack* of a rifle. A man's voice was raised in a hoarse scream that was as suddenly cut off as if a knife had been passed across his throat. Every man in the chuckhouse started as though stung.

"The outlaw raiders!" cried Dusty Trail. "I tried to tell yuh, Elwood!"

"The damned cattle ranchers!" corrected the sheep raiser bitterly. "Run for the gun-rack in the bunkhouse, boys. This dirty buzzard was scoutin' for 'em, and Jordan caught him. Hurry, if yuh want to live! We ain't got time to hang this coyote."

His finger whitened on the trigger of his rifle. The weapon crashed out in the confines of the room as Bill Elwood attempted to mete out justice as he saw it.

But Dusty Trail was no longer before the muzzle of that gun. With the sheep raiser's first phrase, the detective knew his cause was lost, and he moved like a blur. Leaping upon the startled Watkins, he whirled the cook up in a flurry of shifting grips and hurled him straight at the tall sheepman's knees. The rifle bullet meant for Dusty clipped a lock of the cook's scanty hair.

A rifle barrel was unwieldy at close quarters. By the time Elwood dodged the sprawling figure of his cook and swung his long gun around, levering a fresh cartridge into the chamber, his agile prisoner was through the kitchen and diving headling out into the blackness of the night. Elwood's second shot merely mocked him.

And then the sheepmen had plenty else to think of. Men were running through the night. Horses' hoofs made heart-stopping thunder up and down the valley. Guns bellowed and blazed, blooming like fiery lances in the darkness.

Gun thunder crashed all around Dusty as he ran toward the gear shed beyond the smithy for his saddle. He had to have a horse—any horse—from the corral, if he meant to escape alive. He thanked heaven the moon had not yet risen and cursed Elwood's stupidity for not listening to him. If only there were some way he could stop this attack!

Darting around the corner of the smithy he encountered sudden light and near disaster. In the glow of a lantern which he had hung from a nail White Cloud had been searching for a stout rope. The scream from the hills and the ensuing confusion had halted him. He was crauched and listening, a bowie-knife gripped in his sinewy hands, as Dusty rounded the front of the shed and tripped over the heavy oaken bucket half-full of water

which was used as a tempering or cooling tub by the smith.

"Ugh!" exclaimed the half-breed at sight of the staggering Texan. "So you get away from boss, eh? You no get away from me!"

Oblivious to the hoof thunder and increasing gunfire, White Cloud launched himself in a pantherish spring at Trail. It was a crazy scene in the glow of the lantern, with death and destruction stalking the entire ranch—a mad moment snatched from a saturnalia of bloodshed and horror.

THE two men came together with a crash, completing the upset of the already unbalanced Trail. They went down, the breed on top, his knife descending in a terrible blow. Like a well rehearsed and carefully timed act was the results.

Dusty went limp to take the fall he could not prevent, and he lay still for the space of a heartbeat as his heavy shoulder muscles set. Then his left hand shot up a few inches and unerringly caught the wrist of White Cloud's descending knife hand.

The white man's elbow smacked against the ground in spite of the rubbery strength of the muscles beneath his stocky exterior, and he halted the blow with the knife point touching his breast. The breed's narrowed eyes blazed hate not four inches from the bowie's haft.

Before White Cloud could convulse in a writhing attempt to free himself and strike again, Dusty's other hand gripped the breed's left shoulder, and his feet came up to catch White Cloud beneath the thighs. Dusty doubled his legs as he drew up, so that his knees took the breed in the abdomen. With a terrific heave he somersaulted his attacker over his head. White Cloud crashed to the ground on his back, his head touching the Texan's hat.

Twisting like cats, both came to their feet facing each other. White Cloud retaining his grip on his knife. Dusty came up with the bale of the overturned bucket in his fist. As White Cloud lunged, the chunky little Association man swung the heavy bucket around in a swift circle. The heavy missile crashed down on White Cloud's neck between the head and shoulder, slamming him, senseless, to the ground.

Dropping his weapon, Dusty Trail ran on for the gear shed. He almost ran into a pair of horsemen with flaming torches. Bass Marlowe and a companion! Cursing, Marlowe started to throw down with the six-gun gripped in his right hand.

"Wait!" commanded Marlowe. And Dusty was thankful in a way to Jordan after all. Marlowe recognized him, and he saw a faint chance to avert disaster.

"Wait!" repeated the rustler leader. "I know this feller. Where's Jordan, Ball?"

"Dead!" cried Dusty. "Elwood got on to things. They was gonna lynch me, too, and I got away just as you boys rode up. We've gotta travel, Marlowe, we gotta get away quick. No chance for a surprise attack. They're all armed and waitin' for attack, and help's on the way. We gotta shag outa here—now!"

His breathless condition and his good acting put over the idea.

"But Elwood's away!" Marlowe snarled savagely.

"Like hell!" came back Dusty. "It's a trap, I tell yuh! Elwood's directin' his men. I jest got away with my life!"

"Damn Jordan!" rasped the outlaw leader. "I mighta knowed he'd gum things up. I need more men like Dawson and Ackley."

"What'll we do, Bass?" demanded the second horseman impatiently.

"Get the hell outa this valley," growled Marlowe. "Get yore hoss, Ball. Set fire to the barn, Roberts, and start roundin' up the rest of the boys. Pronto!"

Dusty Trail inwardly flinched at this

order, but there was no way he could prevent it. Better to burn an outbuilding or two than to butcher innocent men. He grabbed his saddle from the gear shed and legged it for the horse corral, Marlowe riding along at his heels. Roberts had spurred his mount away toward the storage barn.

THE outlaws seemed to know their way about thoroughly. Evidently Jordan had supplied plenty of information and details. Not once did Marlowe with his blazing torch get out of line with the the smithy or the gear shed so that the besieged men in the house could get a shot at him.

In a moment Dusty was mounted. He galloped away in the wake of the infuriated outlaw leader who wantonly threw his torch into a haystack near the dairy barn. A few minutes later the villainous crew drew together beyond the range of the leaping fires from several places around the ranch buildings. Headed by Marlowe, they rode hastily for the western hills beyond the broken country of which lay the holdings of Thaddeus Kemp.

Surrounded by outlaws, Dusty Trail galloped along. One time he twisted in his saddle and glanced back at the ring of flames laying waste to some of Bill Elwood's possessions, and his heart was heavy within him. The cattlemen were going to get the blame for all this. He had averted bloodshed, but he had not averted war.

No man, especially a man like Bill Elwood, would tamely submit to the pillaging of his home. Unaware of the course of events which were slowly but surely bringing the cattlemen to the boiling point at this same time, Dusty Trail realized that unless Steve Reese found some way to stop it, the sheepmen would be carrying the sword across the cattle ranches within twenty-four hours. And his own work was not yet concluded. He had learned who was behind all the trouble—Bootleg Bass Marlowe! But he had yet to learn why.

Safe in the hills, the leader halted his band on top of a mesa and turned to stare down at the Elwood spread in the valley. An evil smile of joy distorted his sullen, bearded face, visible in the light of the almost full moon which was hanging like a great ball just beyond an eastern peak—a huge sphere balanced on the nose of a giant seal in silhouette. Far below in the valley the dying fires still smoldered.

"It was a good job, anyhow," grunted Marlowe, chuckling. "Even if we didn't kill off anybody. Elwood'll have the Woollie men on the warpath 'fore tomorrow night. And we can collect our pay for the job."

"Will he pay off now, Bass?" questioned Roberts uneasily. "He can welch, now that the work's done."

Marlowe growled in his throat. "Don't start that kind of talk, Roberts. Yuh saw he got us outa that hangin' in Elkhorn, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah, but—"

"But nothin'! We'll wait till tomorrow night to give the ranchers time to get to fightin', and then we'll ride in for a settlement. If these ranchin' fools ain't fightin' by then, we'll drygulch a few of 'em to start things. And if we ain't paid pronto, then's the time to get hard. We'll raid—" He broke off and turned to the silently listening Dusty Trail. "All right, feller, tell yore story. But I can tell yuh now that yuh ain't hornin' in for much of a cut. Yuh came in too late."

"I guess I can speak for Jordan's share," declared Dusty boldly. "I risked my neck to help him, and that won't be deprivin' nobody else of their cut."

"I dunno," began Marlowe, rasping his dirty fingernails through his beard. "I reckon we'll take a vote—"

"I earned it!" Dusty hotly insisted. "Didn't I save yore skins tonight? I want my full share. And if there's still trouble in collectin' from the boss, like

Roberts thinks they might be, I'll do my part of the raidin'."

"That's fair enough!" endorsed Roberts. "How 'bout it, fellers?"

THE other riders growled an assent.

"All right," Marlowe said reluctantly. "That settles that. Now, what happened to make our plans go plumb wrong tonight?"

Secretly thrilled with this new information that an unknown employer was behind the activities of the outlaw band, Dusty proceeded to spill a story out of whole cloth about how Elwood had begun suspecting Jordan the day before and had set a trap for him which had culminated in his death tonight. It was a good yarn, and Dusty, being an ingenious story teller, fitted in the real facts astonishingly well. What he said jibed in so completely with what the outlaws knew, that it was accepted without question.

All he needed now was to learn the name of the mysterious party who had engineered this hellish scheme to fire southwestern Montana, and he would be ready to hand this case to Steve Reese in a bag. All indications pointed to the sinister figure of Gunbarrel Shaw.

"And that's how it happened," he concluded. "Now, s'pose yuh fill in some of the gaps I don't know?"

"Such as?" prompted Marlowe.

"Who the man is that hired us. That's one thing Jordan didn't tell me. He said you would, Marlowe, if the boys accepted me."

"The only plumb smart thing he done," grunted Marlowe. "So yuh don't know who yuh're ridin' for?"

"Not beyond you. Is it—Gunbarrel Shaw?"

"Naw!" snapped Marlowe with a snort. "He don't figure. I reckon he's in Idaho by now. He was paid to get me and three of the boys outa law trouble. He done it, and left."

"By hisself?" asked Dusty incredulously.

"'Course not!" growled the villainous Roberts. "The rest of us helped him. I'm the feller that shot Frank Jackson, myself." His raspy tone was boastful. "We got men planted on different ranches to make trouble between the moolies and the woollies. Dawson and Cluett on the Tumblin' J, Tarp and Ackley on the T K, and others—like you and Jordan—was on Elwood's sheep spread. It was a slick scheme, and it's all worked out. . . . When we gonna get paid off, Bass?"

"We'll ride to Elkhorn tomorrow before dark," decided Marlowe. "Yuh say yuh've never been there, Trail?"

"Huh-uh," Dusty rejoined, shaking his head. "Why?"

"That's fine. Some of these boys might be recognized. They was in town the day of the trial—some of 'em right in court. So we'll hide out east of town in the bend of the Tongue River where there's a growth of sycamore trees, while you ride in to town and scout for us."

This suggestion suited Dusty Trail perfectly. He was wondering how he could get away to report to Doc Reese without having trouble or creating suspicion. But he wasn't foolish enough to jump at the chance now presented. He shook his head.

"It looks to me like yuh're tryin' to use me for the joker," he said slowly. "I don't reckon I better do it."

Opposition crystallized the outlaw leader's decision.

"Well, that's jest what yuh're gonna do," he said harshly. "If yuh want yore cut yuh gotta earn it. Savvy?"

Dusty Trail glanced from one face to another. Finally he brought his gaze back to the hulking leader.

"All right," he agreed ominously. "I ain't scared to go, and I'm takin' yore orders, but listen! If any of you jaspers cross me up, yuh better pray they get me in town. Savvy that?"

"Yuh're all right, Trail!" Marlowe laughed boisterously. "And we'll be square with yuh. Jest wait'll we broach another keg of Sheriff Harper's likker and we'll celebrate right handsome. Come on, boys. Let's be ridin' for the hide-out . . . ."

MEANWHILE, down in the valley, a gaunt man with a face like granite was surveying the smoldering ruins of his buildings. At last he turned to speak to his apprehensive and silent crew of herders, and his voice was gritty as sand in the gravy.

"We ain't waitin' for a peaceful meetin' of sheepmen in town tomorrow night, boys," he said. "Saddle up yore broncs and start ridin' around the sheep spreads tonight. Tell all the herders to meet me in town tomorrow afternoon—and bring their shootin' irons with 'em. It's show-down time 'tween us and the damned cattle hogs!"

CHAPTER XVII

Roundup of the Dead

REESE had no difficulty in explaining his possession of the extra rifle to Thad Kemp, after the departure of Hank Ball for the Tumbling J. He told the truth about it. By the time they rode into town, their acquaintanceship was on a friendly basis. Wise beyond his years in the analysis of the minds and motives of men, Reese had probed to the depths the ambitions of the rugged old man who was fast becoming a dominant power in the new, raw State of Montana.

Warmed unaccountably to this tall and quiet man with the clear and penetrative dark eyes, Thaddeus Kemp opened up like an umbrella in a shower.

"The wealth of Montana lies all around us, Reese," he said. "Not in the development of the cattle and sheep industry, which is great, I admit, but in what lies below the soil. In brief, I mean the mineral wealth. Yore presence here bears me out. There's gold and silver and copper in these mountains which require only the takin' out."

"True," Reese agreed. "You are a man of vision, Senator."

"I'm not altogether altruistic," Kemp admitted with a smile. "That young feller yuh met at the ranch—Hanscomb Ball—is all cattleman. I'm in hopes of sellin' the T K spread to him. I've placed my bets on the minin' industry. That's why I'm doin' everything in my power to bring the Chicago and Western railroad on across the glorious State of Montana."

"I see," encouraged Reese. "But just how do you stand to profit personally?"

"I," said the senator frankly, "own a huge part of the Rosebud Mountains. In fact, I've sunk every dollar I have in the world over and above the T K ranch in minin' land. I know where I stand, but I thought I might get you to do some checkin' up for me, seeing's yuh're here on the ground."

Reese never batted an eye at this astonishing revelation.

"I'll be glad to look into things for you, Senator. Just what, for instance?"

"My property on the east slopes of the Rosebud. The ground's plumb rich with ore. I'm sellin' the T K to raise the money to put up minin' machinery. The railroad will run some twenty miles north—across the northern foot of the T K, but I—ahem—feel that I'll have the needed influence to get them to run a spur line down to

my mines. What I want you to do is make some assays or whatever yuh call the work to see if it will pay to use pack mules to take out the ore—to the proposed route of the railroad, or to Lamar."

"Why Lamar?"

"If—anything should prevent the—extension of the railroad," the senator got out hesitantly. "That's possible, of course. Although I've taken steps to crush out unruly opposition."

"Meaning?"

"This damned sheep and cattle trouble!" bit out Kemp savagely, wiping his brow with his handkerchief. "If a range war breaks, there won't be a chance on earth to get the railroad to build. And if the Chicago and Western don't come, and it won't pay me to mule-pack the ore I'll be—ruined." His voice dropped to a whisper.

"Ah!" murmured Reese. "So that explains your hesitancy to plunge ahead with the hot-headed cattlemen. That is why you want to settle this business without fighting."

"EXACTLY," admitted the senator. "Aside from the humanitarian reasons. This is in strictest confidence, of course, Reese. The cattlemen would crucify me if they suspected that—that—er—personal motives prevent me from takin' decisive action with them against the sheep raisers."

"Does anyone else know of all this?" asked Reese thoughtfully.

"No, not a soul. Not even my own daughter. Elsie is a—ah—bit impatient with me because I ain't doin' more. In political circles it's no secret that I'm tryin' to bring the railroad on through to Helena, but as far as I'm aware nobody knows my—my personal interest. Everything looked fine until this range trouble started. Up to a month ago it didn't look bad. Now, I don't know. That's why I'm in Elkhorn tonight—to see Sheriff Harper and call a mass meetin' of all range people to iron out our differences."

"You are aware, of course," Reese pointed out, "that the sheepmen consider you one of their bitterest enemies as co-organizer of the cattle union. You may have difficulty in placating them."

"Don't yuh think I ought to try?"

"By all means."

"If it don't work, and they want trouble," said the senator grimly, forgetting for the moment that he was a politician and a prospective mine operator, and speaking like the fiery cattleman of earlier days, "by the hide and hair, we'll give it to 'em! If it takes war to bring peace, the sooner we get it over, the better."

"You mention Sheriff Harper in a queer tone. Don't you like him?"

Thad Kemp snorted. "Who can have respect for a gambler without gumption enough to carry out the duties of his office?"

Reese offered no further comment along this line. He had been thinking about the sheriff ever since meeting Alice Harper in Lamar. He was anxious to make the man's acquaintance. Odd that Harper should have disappeared about the time his sister was arriving in Elkhorn.

Then there was the astonishing revelation by Thaddeus Kemp concerning the Rosebud Mountains. Could that have any bearing on the attempt of the drygulcher to take his life? Had he been encroaching on Kemp's property before the senator knew who he was?

But Kemp had certainly shown no signs of recognizing the dead man's rifle. Only the two hands, Ackley and Tarp, had shown startled interest in the gun, and Reese was waiting for a conference with his aides before definitely deciding about that precious pair.

In town they put up at the Stag hotel, and Reese immediately hunted for Alice Harper to invite her to have dinner with them. He found the girl with Howard Thorpe. Both seemed pleased to see him, although Thorpe was patently surprised.

"Hello, Reese," the stage owner greeted pleasantly. "I wasn't expectin' to see yuh for mebbe a week, the way yuh loaded up to leave town. Wasn't that yore mule Andy Jackson brought to town yesterday?"

"I don't know. I lost the brute. I wound up at the T K ranch. The senator came back to Elkhorn with me. In fact, I was going to ask you, Miss Harper, to dine with us."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said the girl. "Mr. Thorpe and I just had supper."

"Kemp is in town?" Thorpe frowned. "I'd like to see him."

"Join us for coffee," invited Reese. "Any word from your brother yet, Miss Harper?"

AN anxious look passed over the girl's face.

"No," she confessed. "But Mr. Thorpe assures me there's no cause for alarm. You see, the stage from Butte, due tonight, hasn't come in yet."

Reese raised his eyebrows, looking a question at Thorpe.

"Did Harper go to Butte?"

"He didn't say where he was goin'," said Thorpe, glancing at the girl.

"The stage make a practice of missing out like this?" pursued Reese.

"May have had a break-down and had to lay over at Wheeler for repairs," replied Thorpe. Probably be in some time tonight."

He stepped slightly behind the girl and shook his head at Reese. Then he said, as he started away:

"While you two talk a bit I'll go to the dinin' room and chin with Senator Kemp a few minutes."

"Sorry I ran away yesterday, Miss Harper," Reese said, smiling, "but I seem to have left you in good hands. How do you like Thorpe?"

"Oh, he's been very nice to me," she answered quickly. "He's a forceful person, typical of the men of the West, I suppose. I met Andy Jackson, of the Tumbling J in town this morning. He—he seems rather nice, after all."

When they entered the hotel dining room, they found the senator and the stage owner talking earnestly together. The two men broke off as Reese and the girl neared. The conversation drifted into light channels.

Reese was thoughtful when he went to bed that night to puzzle over the various pieces of the puzzle that he had at hand. He hadn't needed to go out to get the feel of things. All over Elkhorn the tension had been growing painfully tight, and the non-arrival of the eastbound stage had not improved matters any.

Reese was a little late in rising the next morning and, missing Judge Tankard at breakfast because of the old gunsmith's early habits, the Association man went to the gun shop later in the forenoon to call on him.

He found Tankard busily engaged in forging a special part for a shotgun. The judge was clearly relieved to see him. He sent his helper out on an errand and turned his attention to Steve Reese.

"Nothin's happened in town, Doc," he reported. "Andy Jackson brought yore mule in, and that had me worried until I heard last night yuh'd come in with Thad Kemp. Harper ain't showed up. I thought he was goin' to visit Kemp."

"He never put in an appearance at the T K," Reese said, frowning. "I'm waiting for information today which may throw some light on various things. Keep your eyes open for two men named Hank Ball and Dusty Trail."

Tankard gaped at his visitor's hat.

"Humph!" he grunted quizzically. "Yuh're wearin' a hole. How come?"

Reese explained.

"I don't know who it could have been," Tankard deliberated reflectively. "I'll try to find out. Say, it couldn't have been the feller Andy Jackson was inquirin' about—Jim Cluett—could it? Yuh said it was a Tumblin' J hoss? That's who it was, Reese! Now, what the dickens d'yuh know about that?"

"Precisely nothing," admitted Reese. "Keep on talking, Judge."

THEY were still in conference when a rapid clatter of hoofs rose to a crescendo along the main street. Reese glanced out, jerked his head to take a second look, and ran to the door to whistle shrilly at the passing rider. It was Hank Ball.

The redhead flung up his arm in greeting, slithered to a halt, and wheeled his mount. He was back at the door of the gun shop in a hurry, his horse lowering his head to pant and blow. Reese looked at the sweat and the foam-flecked shoulders of the sorrel. His eyes searched his assistant's face for news.

Hank glanced over his shoulder at Judge Tankard, standing in the doorway.

"Judge Tankard, Hank," Reese said swiftly. "I told you about him. Judge, this is a man I can trust—Hank Ball. What is it, Hank? You may speak freely."

"Hell!" Hank said tersely. "I found the sheriff, killed Tarp and Ackley, got what yuh wanted to know about the drygulcher, and Sheriff Harper and me found what was left of the eastbound stage."

Judge Tankard uttered a gurgling exclamation.

"Come inside," Reese said quickly.

Five minutes later the judge clapped his hat on his head and went down the street to the undertaker's. Within thirty minutes four riders and a big wagon left town by a back way and headed for the scene of the disaster. Hank Ball remained at the gun shop in lengthy conference with the keen-minded Reese.

When Tom Suggs returned, the judge's helper was surprised to receive a holiday for the rest of the day. Being astute, he asked no questions, but went promptly over to the Three Fingers to catch up with his drinking.

"Go on with your complete report, Hank," ordered Reese, as Suggs disappeared. "What you've just told me changes certain notions I had."

By the time Sheriff Harper led his grim cavalcade along the main street of Elkhorn the leader of the Texas trio had in his possession every fact, no matter how trivial, that Hank Ball had gathered.

"Still no word from Dusty?" asked the redhead anxiously.

"None," Reese soberly admitted. "Elwood hasn't been to town for several days, either."

"If we don't hear before mornin'," Hank vowed solemnly, "I'm ridin' out to hunt him, Doc."

Reese smiled sympathetically. "Keep your head, Hank. We've been separated before."

"But not in such hell country as this. Yore life was attempted. Then mine was. Gawd only knows what might happen to that cigar-smokin' idiot. Folks pick on him. You know that."

"Not successfully." Reese shook his head. "But cheer up. If we don't hear from Dusty by morning I think we'll both be in the saddle. Things are about to break wide open. Let's trail the sheriff and see what happens. I haven't laid eyes on the man yet."

"But yuh know more about him now than he does, himself," Hank grunted admiringly. "A helluva lot more'n I know—and yet I told yuh."

Judge Tankard cleared his throat,

and the two Association men looked at him. The judge's face was grave. He moved over to the wall gun case and opened it.

"Go on with yore business, gents," he said. "I'll be here loadin' guns when yuh get back. I don't follow everything Hank has told yuh, but I can see trouble so close ahead I smell the gunpowder. If Harper wants me for anything, I'll come."

A CROWD was already collecting at the undertaking parlor when Reese and Ball got there. The undertaker and his assistants were bringing in the dead through the back door. Hank pushed his way to the front door and found it locked. At his authoritative knock Sheriff Harper opened the door. He stood back to permit Hank and Reese to enter, relocking the door behind him.

For the first time the gambler sheriff and the ace Cattle Association man stood face to face. Harper, after one swift glance at Ball, stared into Steve Reese's eyes.

"That's Reese," said Hank. "He's the man that rode from Lamar with yore sister the other day."

"Oh!" exclaimed Harper. "Of course I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Reese, but—but—"

Steve Reese smiled. He had made up his mind about this man.

"I'm a deputy marshal—among other things, Sheriff," he said quietly. "I'd like to be present when you tell this news to Howard Thorpe."

Harper's eyes widened the merest trifle. That was all. Then his gaze shot toward Hank Ball.

"So that's how you fit this picture, pardner," he said evenly. "I was wonderin'. Well, come on, both of yuh."

"First," Reese said gently, "I'd like to see the stagecoach victims."

Wordlessly Harper led the way rearward. In the undertaker's crowded little morgue the Association man studied the five dead men carefully, one after the other. The two men Hank had shot he ignored. At length he nodded his head and straightened.

"That's all," he said, without explanation. "I'm ready."

They met Howard Thorpe at the door of the funeral parlor. The news of the tragedy had already reached the owner of the stage line. Thorpe entered, his face a grim mask in which only the brown eyes lived. The sheriff relocked the door behind him to keep out the growing crowd.

There was a heightening excitement in the street. Men were riding back and forth, standing in groups here and there, or in the saloons. At the Tomahawk a crowd had gathered, with a predominance of sheepmen. Everywhere was noise and growing tumult.

Howard Thorpe grabbed the sheriff by the shoulder.

"Tell me jest what happened, Harper!" he demanded, clearly making an effort to keep his voice restrained.

For the moment he did not even notice Hank Ball. Reese, he ignored. The sheriff gently released his shoulder and complied with a brief but accurate account of the stage calamity.

"Where are the bodies?" asked the stage owner.

Again the sheriff led the way rearward. "Take it easy, Thorpe. We'll get the coyotes."

The stage owner stared down at the row of seven bodies. He started suddenly at sight of the forms of Slim Tarp and Tennessee Ackley.

"So they were the outlaws?" he muttered, in a queer voice. His face was terrible. "Yuh don't know how right yuh are, Harper. It was the Bass Marlowe band. And I know who instigated it!" He raised his fist in a curse. "And, so help me, Gawd, I'll pay him off!"

"Yuh're plumb wrong there, feller," said a crisp voice from the threshold.

"Bass Marlowe and his gang was north of Elwood's sheep ranch yesterday, and I was with 'em all last night and up till noon today. They couldn't of done it."

Everybody jerked quickly about. Hank Ball uttered an exclamation. There in the back door stood the stocky, untidy figure of Dusty Trail, a half-smoked cigar gripped between his teeth and bracketed there by a hard grin.

CHAPTER XVIII

Pistol-Whipped

HOWARD THORPE stared at Dusty Trail as though seeing an apparition. Reese said nothing, merely watching everything with those searching black eyes of his. Harper looked undecided, like a cornered cat that didn't know which way to jump.

"Jest who the hell are you?" the stage owner demanded.

"Name of Dusty Trail," replied the newest recruit of Bootleg Bass Marlowe's band. "Never mind about me right now. I'm here to tell all you jaspers yuh better shelve this stagecoach business for the present unless yuh want to get yore whole town shot out from under yuh. Bill Elwood and his sheep friends are in town gettin' ready to raid a few cattle ranches, and a bunch of Tumblin' J, Boxed M, and T K cowhands are ridin' in from the west to save 'em a trip."

At this startling news they paled. Even Reese looked apprehensive. In the brief silence they became aware of the growing roar of the crowd outside. With a swift look about him, first at Trail, then at Hank Ball, and finally at Reese, the stage owner whirled and ran for the front door. Sheriff Harper instantly followed him.

Reese advanced on Dusty Trail, careless of the presence of the alarmed undertaker.

"Start talking, Dusty," he ordered tersely. "Give me all you know—quick!"

In minutes the ace detective had all the details. The mystery was no longer a mystery to him. His face became alive with the force of his rapid thoughts. His eyes sparkled in swift alarm.

"Dusty!" he ordered. "Your string's played out with the sheepmen, and, Hank, since you've killed Tarp and Tennessee, you're in bad with the cattlemen. I'm switching you boys for safety. Dusty, run down the street, stop by the gun shop for Judge Tankard, and the two of you ride like hell to meet the cattle ranchers and halt them at the edge of town. Hank, you'll find Sheriff Harper somewhere outside. Join him and hold the sheepmen in check for just a little while. I'll meet you at the Tomahawk as quickly as I can get there."

"Where you goin'?" demanded Dusty as Reese started out the back door at a run.

"To prevent a murder!" Reese called back without faltering in his stride. "Howard Thorpe is going to kill Thaddeus Kemp. But you boys have the hard job. You've got to prevent a massacre."

Along the alley which straggled its sordid way across the rear of the false-fronted stores on the main street Steve Reese ran for the Stag hotel like a sprinter. Bitterly he was reviling himself for having been so blind.

That he could not have been expected to solve the riddle without the additional facts Dusty Trail had just brought to him he did not take into account. Though he had been pretty

close to guessing the rather complicated answer last night, after his talk with Thaddeus Kemp. With Hank Ball's complete report, he felt that he should have figured the answer and made his moves without waiting to let men trap themselves.

But he hadn't known about the raid on Elwood's place and therefore it was impossible for him to have anticipated the sudden, raging action of the sheep growers. Nevertheless, the brilliant detective scourged himself. Excuses and explanations and alibis might save face, but they did not save lives.

MUCH time had been lost, more than a man would realize. It was sundown, he noted, as he ran. The sun hung, a huge red ball, just beyond the western prairie, its rim already kissing the horizon like a gigantic ball of fire just setting the world aflame. His shadow leaped far head of him, a hungry hound of black silently baying the way to some focal point of catastrophe.

The noise which reached his ears from the street was like the angry roaring of surf. Above the clatter of hoofs and occasional loud shouts there was the infrequent bellow of a gun.

But nothing moved along the back alley save the desperately running Association man. As he crossed gaps that would some day become street intersections—if Elkhorn survived—he could see the surging crowd on the main street. Townsfolk and sheepmen hopelessly intermingled. Surprised cattlemen, trapped in two or three houses, were barring doors and windows and preparing for a siege.

Rounding the corner of the last building between him and the stockade of the stagecoach yard, Reese legged it for the main street and the hotel opposite. With a groan of despair he heard the sudden thunder of many hoofs and saw, as he reached the street, that Hank must have been too late. News of the coming of the cattlemen had already reached the sheep raisers, and armed men were riding down the street from the Tomahawk, yelling and cursing, as they followed the lead of the vengeful Bill Elwood.

Out of town to the rolling prairie through which the Tongue River wound its imperturbable way, thundering in a veritable cavalry charge, the outraged sheepmen rode bitterly to give battle to the arrogant cattle lords. Inflamed townsmen, swept out of their senses by the mob spirit, fired by John Barleycorn, rode with them.

Bill Elwood's eloquence had set the whole of Elkhorn ablaze with indignation. Only Steve Reese knew what would stop the slaughter now, if only he could present the truth in time!

After leaving the undertaking parlor, Howard Thorpe ran along the street to the stagecoach yard. The place was deserted; all the men had joined the surging crowd in the street and in the saloons. But Thorpe was not interested in any of his workers.

Bursting into his office he spun the dial of his iron safe and quickly opened the strongbox. From its interior he drew a pair of slim-barreled six-shooters and buckled them on in place of the single gun he wore. Glancing swiftly around at the place he was bidding farewell to for the last time, he stuffed all the currency and change he could find in the safe into his pockets, and walked out.

Across the dusty street and into the deserted hotel lobby he strode, his mind fixed on a grim purpose. The lone clerk at the desk looked up, startled at the stark expression on his employer's face.

"Where's Thad Kemp?" Thorpe demanded harshly. "Skipped?"

"N-no, sir," replied the frightened clerk. "He's upstairs in his room—Two-twelve. He was jest about overcome at the news of the stage massacre.

Gosh, Mr. Thorpe, I—"

"I reckon he was," snapped the stage line owner, and headed for the stairs.

Taking the steps three at a time, he strode along to the door of Room 212 and grabbed the handle without even the pretense of knocking. The door was locked. Even as Senator Kemp's shaken voice came, asking who it was, Thorpe drew back slightly and hurled his shoulder against the barrier.

THE flimsy lock gave way, and he crashed on into the chamber. Steadying himself Thorpe stared at the somehow shrunken and pitiful figure of the whitehaired old senator sitting in the armchair by the window.

"Don't move!" he warned, as the old man made a startled movement.

"Thorpe!" gurgled the T K rancher. "What are you doin' here? I—I thought yuh'd be on yore way out to the scene of the—the disaster. My Gawd, man, that was terrible!"

"I'm on my way out, all right," Thorpe said grimly. "Thanks to you! But I've got business with yuh first."

"With me? Why? What—"

"Don't start lyin', Kemp. Yuh damn' fool! Yuh oughta knowed I'd pin it on you the first thing!"

"Yuh—yuh're crazy!" denied the senator, but his words lacked force. "I'm as shocked as anybody. I—I can't understand it!"

"I can," Thorpe said relentlessly.

Both men were so intent on each other that neither heard the stealthy step out in the dark hallway. Neither of them saw the bearded face of Bass Marlowe peer around the corner of the door frame and then draw back as the outlaw flattened himself against the wall to listen. Only the clerk downstairs knew that Marlowe was in the house, and he could not have told because he lay in a crumpled, unconscious heap behind his desk.

"I can," repeated Thorpe in a terrible voice. "Yuh set out to break me so's I couldn't fight against the comin' of yore railroad to develop yore minin' interests. Yuh figgured that by wipin' me out, piece by piece, yuh'd have me whipped and cryin' for mercy. Yuh hired Tarp and Ackley to do this first job. But yuh didn't figger on 'em runnin' into a little hard luck with that redheaded stranger, did yuh? Yuh own the weak-kneed sheriff, too, don't yuh—got him lassoed because he's in love with yore daughter? Yuh damn' near own everything that ain't tied down!

"But yuh wouldn't of got past the first deal if it wasn't for one thing. There was fifty thousand dollars in gold on that stage, and Harper didn't bring it back with him. I can't pay that off, and you knew I couldn't! Now, before I beat yore head into a pulp and then kill yuh for bleedin', tell me where them two polecats hid that gold!"

"I—I don't know, Thorpe," whispered the old man. "That's one of the things I can't understand."

"Fool!" snarled Thorpe. "If Tarp and Ackley would work against me, for you, don't yuh know they'd do the same thing to you jest as quick? But they didn't! You're in this up to yore dirty neck, and yuh're gonna tell me where they hid that loot!"

"I tell yuh I don't know!" groaned Kemp. "And yuh've got a lot of nerve to accuse me of anything—you, the man back of all this trouble between the cattlemen and the sheepmen! Startin' a range war to scare off the railroad."

"Curse yuh!" Thorpe snarled. "I tried to make a deal with yuh! I tried only last night to come to terms, to sell out to yuh and let yuh go ahead with yore damn' railroadin', but yuh wouldn't deal!"

"I—I couldn't. I haven't any money. I told yuh that. Every cent I have in the world is tied up in minin' property—which ain't any good without the railroad transportation. You are the

man the ranchers would tear to pieces if they knew what I know about yuh. You hired the Marlowe gang to terrorize this range. You planted men on different ranches to fan the flames of trouble. You are the—"

"THE hell with that!" Thorpe ripped out. "Like the sneakin' old buzzard yuh are, yuh nosed out Tarp and Ackley and hired 'em to betray me. With the whole range on fire now, yuh've crippled me by the loss of that gold. Damn yore soul, yuh've ruined me. Listen!"

He pointed at the window, through which came the mad roar of the crowd of sheepmen.

"Yuh're the cause of all that, and Bass Marlowe'll be in town tonight to collect his pay. And I can't pay him! Hell! I didn't intend to pay him nohow. I hired Gunbarrel Shaw to save his dirty neck for him. That was pay enough. But, damn yuh, Kemp, I want that gold! Tell me where it is!"

"I don't—know," the old man gasped out. "I didn't want any killin's at all. I don't know what—"

With one bound Thorpe leaped forward, drawing both his guns. Kemp let out a startled cry and went to his own weapon. Age and his awkward position slowed his hand. Just as his six-shooter cleared leather Thorpe was upon him.

With the chopping motion of a butcher with a meat cleaver, the infuriated stage line owner brought his gun barrel down upon the senator's unprotected head. As the old man groaned and slumped in his chair, Thorpe began slashing at the senator's head with both guns, ripping open the scalp with the sharp front sights, half tearing off one ear in his murderous frenzy, but never quite knocking his victim unconscious.

"Tell me!" he panted. "Where's that gold?"

"If they didn't take it up to—to that abandoned trapper's cabin on Baldy Ridge—I can't—tell yuh," moaned the bloody ruin of the once proud Senator Kemp.

"So!" grunted Thorpe, and the killer light flamed in his blazing dark eyes. "That's what I wanted to know. Now, this is for buckin' me."

He had ceased his flailing motions as the old cattleman tried to talk. Now he brought the barrels of both his weapons up and fired pointblank at Kemp's chest. The old man, trying to stagger erect, reeled back, then crashed forward on his face on the floor.

Thorpe whirled as he heard footsteps running up the stairs. He looked wildly around. Out the window he saw the roof of the one-story kitchen behind the hotel. Without an instant's hesitation he leaped forward and slipped out of the window to hang by the ledge for an instant and then drop.

In the hall the raging Marlowe also heard those feet flying up the stairs. He leaped across the hall. The second door he tried, gave to his touch, and he secreted himself in the room just as Steve Reese came up the steps.

From the room next to that of Senator Kemp's a shaken and white-faced Alice Harper tottered out into the hall just in time to wilt in Reese's arms. Pausing only long enough to catch her slender figure up, Reese ran on to the open doorway.

One glance around the door frame showed him that his man had flown. He stood the horrified girl on her feet and quickly shook her back to her senses.

"I—I heard—" she faltered.

"Come along with me!" he directed tersely. "Your life isn't worth a plugged nickel."

The trembling girl obediently followed him into the chamber of violence. Reese took in the details in one swift glance. At sight of the old man's slashed and gory head he nodded. Kneeling, he gently turned

Kemp over. To his surprise the senator's eyelids fluttered weakly.

"REESE," murmured the old man, trying to focus his gaze. "That's you, ain't it—Reese?"

"Yes, Senator. I tried to get here in time to save you, but I couldn't make it."

"Save me?" whispered Kemp. "For what? Hangin'?"

"You mean the stagecoach job that Tarp and Ackley did? Maybe not hanging, Senator. You had some justification?"

"I didn't mean for them to—to commit murder," confessed the old T K rancher. "I wasn't gonna keep the gold and mail."

"I know that," said Reese. "You were just striking back at Thorpe. You meant to cripple, to ruin him, to break his determined opposition to your railroad plans, to drive him out of the country. You tried to fight fire with fire."

"You know? All of it?"

"Almost all," Reese nodded.

"As Gawd is my judge," solemnly whispered the dying man, "I didn't mean for there to be any killin's. I jest wanted Thorpe crippled financially so he would sell out. I jest wanted to fight him like he was fightin' me."

"You caught on to the fact that Tarp and Ackley were Marlowe's men, placed on your ranch to fan the trouble between cattle and sheep, and you bought them over. That was a fatal mistake, Senator Kemp. Vicious men like that pair would turn on their own parents. They turned on Marlowe for you, and they were turning on you. That stagecoach robbery and slaughter was for keeps. And they would have had you in their power if one of my detectives hadn't run across them this morning."

"One of — detectives? I thought Hank Ball— Is he—are you—"

"Both of us, Senator," Reese said softly. "Tarp and Ackley, planning their hold-up two days before, ran into Sheriff Harper who was on his way to see you. They thought he was wise to them, so they tied him up in a mountain cabin. That's why you came with me to town—to have a perfect alibi by being in Elkhorn if anything went wrong. But no matter where you were, didn't you realize that Howard Thorpe would instantly suspect you?"

"He got me—the dirty sidewinder!" moaned Kemp. "He came bustin' in. I was already sick with the news that Tarp and Ackley had committed murder. I thought I'd bluff it out. I didn't know what to do. But Thorpe pistol-whipped me and then shot me down. I had it comin', and I can die like a man, but, Reese, he is the man that hired Marlowe and the gang in the first place to cause a range war and block the comin' of the railroad."

"He is more than that," Reese said tightly. "He has succeeded in setting the range aflame."

Kemp groaned weakly. "I tried to prevent that."

"I know you did, Senator Kemp. That's why Montana should not judge you too harshly."

"To hell with Montana's judgment!" panted the old man, pathetic in his whispered fierceness. "It's Elsie. Don't let Elsie—"

He choked horribly on the blood welling up into his throat, tried to cough, and died before he could speak again. Reese got to his feet and turned on white-faced Alice Harper. She was sobbing without tears, frightened and hysterical little sounds of terror.

"YOU heard everything, Alice Harper?" he asked crisply.

"Y-yes," she managed to get out, uncertainly.

"Remember it carefully. I will

need your testimony later. Now, go straight back to your room and lock the door. As you value your life, don't unlock your door until I call to you. Pull the dresser in front of the door. Believe me, girl, I know what I'm talking about."

"But — but my brother," she faltered. "You mentioned my brother. What—"

"He is here in Elkhorn and safe for the present. I'll try to keep him that way. Now do precisely as I have told you."

At the commanding tone of his voice the girl lost some of her fright. She straightened up, flushing slightly, and obeyed without another word. As soon as he heard the key turn in her lock, Reese sprang across the hall to his own room.

It was the room in which Bass Marlowe had hid, but the outlaw was no longer there. He had departed as silently as he had come, his heart black with rage at the perfidy of Howard Thorpe.

CHAPTER XIX

Range Truce

MOVING in haste but with surety, Reese threw aside all semblance of his role as a tenderfoot geologist. Peeling out of his tweed jacket, he hauled his suitcase out from under the bed. Hurriedly pulling on his slick chaps, he took up a pair of gunbelts and buckled them around his slim hips. The bottoms of the holsters had buckskin thongs which he tied around his muscular thighs.

Examining the pair of black-butted .38s with their long, slender barrels, he reholstered them grimly. He realized that he was facing one of the most dangerous moments of his career, and it was a question whether or not he would win out. Discarding the shoulder holster and gun he had been wearing, he sprinted for the stairs. Steve Reese, thinker, had metamorphosed into Doc Reese, man of action.

Down in the street, now completely deserted, the wind brought to his straining ears the faint sounds of gunfire out west of town, bringing home the bitter realization that the range war so long threatening had burst at last into devastating flame. And he still lacked the final proof necessary to stop it before it was too late. He needed Howard Thorpe, and Thorpe had fled.

He ran across the street to the stagecoach yard. The double gates stood wide. The westbound coach, held since noon, was inside the yard, the boot still loaded with luggage. In the corral several horses moved about restlessly.

From the stables came the sounds and smell of other horses, but not a single human being was in evidence. The office was deserted, the safe standing open. The whole place had an abandoned air. Passengers had sought refuge in various stores, doubtless. And the guards and hostlers had undoubtedly ridden out with the sheepmen to engage in battle.

Reese was torn between two urgent desires. He wanted to trail Howard Thorpe before the trail grew cold, and he wanted to stop the fight between the cattlemen and sheepmen. From the picture he had of Bill Elwood, graphically drawn by Dusty Trail, he knew he could make the man listen to reason if he could get to him.

Still cursing himself for bad mismanagement of this affair, that he

could not have helped, he appropriated one of the coach horses and hastily saddled the animal. As he rode out of the yard duty won a temporary victory. He turned westward and spurred his mustang into a mad gallop.

Out through the fringe of town, the sound of firing getting sharper and more angrily distinct with each leap of his horse, he rode the stage trail. He wondered fearfully what could have happened to his daredevil aides. Could they have been carried away by the mad bloodlust of battle? Bitterly he realized that they had not separately known enough of the real situation. But there had not been time to analyze the case for them in the backroom of the undertaking parlor.

Riding at full tilt he came upon the scene of the battle. Deployed at the brow of a little rise, crouching or lying prone behind boulders and brush, firing at will down the slope at the thick growth of willows along the river, were the berserk sheepmen. From the line of willows came answering puffs of smoke and the crash of gunfire of the cattlemen. Down in the open between the lines lay several huddled forms, showing where the first clash had taken place. A horse with a broken foreleg was screaming and struggling desperately to get to its feet.

BEHIND a huge rock near at hand stood Hank Ball and Sheriff Harper, arguing forcefully with a gaunt, grim-looking man who was not paying them much attention. He stood with a rifle in his hands, his bleak eyes searching the line of willows for a glimpse of a man at whom he could shoot. Scornful of the bullets whistling over the rock and around his head, he stood there.

Several men turned their heads at the clattering approach of Steve Reese. Ignoring them all, himself ignoring the hail of bullets, Reese leaped from his mount and rushed to the trio at the large boulder. Straight to the adamant sheep rancher he strode and grasped the man's rifle.

"Give it here!" he commanded authoritatively. "If you haven't the decency to shoot that suffering animal down there, I will."

His very attitude of confidence and complete lack of hesitation baffled Elwood. The man relinquished the gun almost stupidly. Instantly Reese leveled down on the injured animal and fired one shot. The horse shuddered once, its screaming cut off abruptly. It flopped to its side and lay still.

Then, and then only, did Reese turn back to face the owner of the rifle.

"Your name is Elwood, isn't it?" he stated, rather than asked.

"Yes," admitted the sheepman, flushing slightly. "Yuh shame me, stranger."

"Stranger, hell!" Hank Ball snapped angrily. "This is Deputy Marshal Reese, the man I was tellin' yuh about. Doc, I'm sorry, but me and Sheriff Harper didn't get to 'em in time to stop 'em in town."

"I know," Reese nodded. "They were already on the run when we left the funeral parlor. Elwood, Thad Kemp is dead. He was killed by the man who has caused all this trouble —Howard Thorpe. I have all the proof you need — if you stop this crazy feud before you kill all my witnesses."

Bill Elwood, in spite of his just cause for anger against somebody, proved that he was a man of intelligence.

"All right," he said. "I'll listen."

"Good!" Reese said crisply, tying a white handkerchief to the gun barrel and waving the weapon aloft.

"Hey, what—" began the alarmed sheepman.

"We need the help of the cattle-

men. I've a man over there, if you haven't killed him. And Judge Tankard is with them, also. You don't want to kill the judge, do you?"

Elwood, already staggered by what he had heard, was confused.

"Damned if I can understand this," he muttered.

"You will in a minute. You weren't supposed to understand it. You were expected to go crazy mad. Listen!"

The gunfire from the willows died away, and yells arose. The line of sheepmen along the brow of the hill gripped their guns apprehensively and watched the popping out into the open of the cattlemen, but they did not fire. Then, in the van of the now approaching riders appeared the majestic figure of Judge Tankard and the unmistakable form of Dusty Trail.

Elwood, watching, stiffened.

"Why—that's the buzzard that killed Lace Jordan!" he exclaimed. "What the hell!"

"Right!" snapped Reese. "He is a detective for the Cattlemen's Protective Association, whose aid Judge Tankard wrote for. He it was who learned that the Marlowe gang had been instrumental in causing all this trouble. As soon as those cattlemen come up here, I'll explain the whole mess to you."

URGED by Judge Tankard and Dusty Trail, the surviving cattlemen approached. The sheepmen gathered solidly behind Elwood. Andy Jackson, his young face dark with hate, moved up to confront Bill Elwood.

"Elwood," he said tersely, "I don't know what this is all about, but I'll listen to that man—for the sake of all my friends. But I'm warnin' yuh to yore face that I hold yuh responsible for my father's death, and after this truce is over I'm ridin' gun sign on yuh. This range ain't big enough—"

"Jackson!" Reese said sternly. "Listen to me! Bill Elwood had no more to do with all this trouble than you did. The man who shot your father is an outlaw in Bass Marlowe's band by the name of Roberts. If you will hear me out, I promise to lead you to your just revenge."

The wrathful young owner of the Tumbling J heard this amazing statement without a change of expression. But he turned from the rigid and unyielding figure of the gaunt sheepman to eye the speaker bleakly. In two hostile groups the cattle and sheep ranchers stood facing each other while Steve Reese stood between them and briefly told off his points.

"First, Detective Trail learned that Jordan was a secret member of the Marlowe gang, planted on Elwood's spread to cause trouble. Jordan arranged that raid last night, and Dusty had to kill him to save his own life as soon as he found out about it. You wouldn't let Dusty explain, Elwood, and he couldn't tell you he was a cattle detective because you were thoroughly prejudiced against all cattlemen by that time. There were other members of the gang on other spreads —Tarp and Ackley on the T K, Dawson and Cluett on the Tumbling J. Where is Dawson, by the way, Jackson?"

"At the ranch," said the Tumbling J man.

"Send out to get him, Sheriff Harper," ordered Reese. "He will be one of our witnesses. But to get on. Thaddeus Kemp put all his money in mining property, a fact which will be verified from Helena, and he was trying to bring the Chicago and Western railroad on from Lamar.

"Even though the proposed route was to be twenty miles north of Howard Thorpe's present stage line, it would practically ruin the stagecoach business. And Thorpe had every

dime outside of the Stag Hotel and the Tomahawk invested in his stage line. With the coming of the railroad he would have lost his express and mail contracts. He couldn't sell out to them at anything like cost. He had nothing to offer them they could use—not even a right of way.

"When he couldn't talk Thad Kemp out of the idea, he chose a drastic method to prevent the coming of the railroad until he had time to clean up on this range. He tried to start a sheep and cattle war, using Bass Marlowe and his gang.

"To clear up the mystery of Jim Cluett, Jackson, I'll tell you this: I had to kill him in the foothills of the Rosebud Mountains where he tried to drygulch me. Thorpe sent him out from town because he thought I was a geologist hired by Thad Kemp, and therefore inimical to his stage line interests.

"But Senator Kemp got on to Thorpe's scheme after the trial of Bass Marlowe, although he couldn't prove it. So he nosed out Tarp and Ackley on his own spread and bought them over, arranging to fight Thorpe with his own weapons. He intended wiping out the stage line. Yesterday's massacre was the first step. However, Kemp did not mean for his men to commit murder, but you can't control evil forces when you once unleash them.

"KEMP met Tarp and Ackley at the cabin on Baldy Ridge to plan his guerilla campaign. He made the mistake of leaving stuff there that, as secretary of the local Stock Growers' Union, should have been among his own papers. Ball, my other deputy, brought that proof to me. That tied Kemp up with the two killers.

"You, Sheriff Harper, on your way to see Kemp, frightened the pair of villains who thought you were on to them, and they kidnaped you and held you at that cabin. From what Kemp let drop to me about taking steps against his opposition, I knew that he was mixed up in the matter before he gave me his dying confession.

"It was when Hank Ball got on to Dawson and escaped from your place, Jackson, that he came upon the stagecoach massacre and trailed the two killers to their mountain hide-out where he rescued the sheriff and found the loot. He didn't tell Sheriff Harper much, because Harper also suspected Kemp's complicity and was trying to shield the old man on account of Elsie.

"When Dusty Trail brought in the final bits to fit into the puzzle, proving that the Marlowe gang was to blame, it was obvious that Kemp was not backing the attempt to cause war. So there was only one other person who fitted into the scheme of things. It had to be Thorpe. He was amazed to find Tarp and Ackley as the dead outlaw killers. He thought they were Marlowe's men. And he proved my conviction of his guilt by hunting for Kemp and killing the old man before I could get there in time to prevent it. Alice Harper overheard the entire scene from her room next to Kemp's. She was with me when Kemp made his confession.

"That raid on your place last night, Elwood, was calculated to set off things with a bang. It almost succeeded in spite of Dusty's heroic work in averting a slaughter. The scheme almost failed before when Frank Jackson caught Marlowe, and Thorpe had to arrange to get his chief lieutenant free.

"Marlowe and his band are waiting right now east of town, for dark, to ride in and collect their pay from Thorpe for their villainy, and you men are out here at each other's throats, leaving the town wide-open to them. With the capture of the Marlowe

gang, I will have final and complete proof of all that I say. Each of you men know whether or not you can corroborate the bits of information I have outlined that come within your knowledge. Are you going to bury the hatchet like men, big enough to admit that you are wrong and have been badly misled?"

"What about Thorpe?" demanded Elwood in a hard voice. "Yuh said he murdered Kemp at the hotel and got away before yuh could catch him."

"I'm afraid he has escaped—for the present," Reese reluctantly admitted. "I had to choose between trailing him and coming to stop your senseless battle. We will pick up his trail later. Well, what are you men going to do?"

ELWOOD turned to face young Jackson. He held out his hand.

"Son," he said gravely, "I'm tellin' yuh, man to man, I'm sorry about yore dad, and that I never had anything at all to do with it."

Andy Jackson stared at him for a moment. Then he slowly grasped the extended hand.

"After all Reese has told us," he said huskily, "I believe yuh, Elwood. I'm sorry, too."

Reese smiled slightly.

"Come with me," he said. "Dusty Trail will lead you to the man who killed your father, Andy."

Shouting lustily, the reconciled stockmen rounded up their horses, gathered up their dead, bound up their wounds, and followed this new and magnetic leader through the gathering dusk back into Elkhorn.

It proved unnecessary to ride out to the east to meet the Marlowe band. For as they rode into town, some fifty strong, the sound of shots and yells from the neighborhood of the stagecoach yard greeted them.

Bass Marlowe had brought his gang of outlaws in to take vengeance on the property of Howard Thorpe.

CHAPTER XX

Destiny's Toll

NOTWITHSTANDING Reese's belief, Howard Thorpe did not leave town after shooting Thaddeus Kemp. Unaware that the three men he had seen at the undertaking parlor were detectives and working together, ignorant of the fact that his duplicity was known, the stage line owner figured that he had to cover the murder of Kemp only.

Escaping over the kitchen roof, he brought himself up short in his ridiculous panic and smiled to himself as he dropped to the ground behind the hotel. This was suspiciously like the actions of such a tinhorn as Bass Marlowe. It was altogether out of keeping with the character of Howard Thorpe. If worst came to worst, he had but to admit he had shot Thaddeus Kemp and tell the truth as to why he had done so.

As the receding sounds of the frenzied sheepmen came to his ears, he laughed. With the removal of Thaddeus Kemp the immediate danger of a railroad was eliminated. There was no longer any need for a cattle and sheep war. Nevertheless, it had been successfully started. Let it rage. Marlowe and the boys had done their job well.

Which thought sobered him instantly. It was still payday for the outlaws. If he didn't recover that gold shipment taken from the burned coach, he wasn't going to be able to make good the loss and pay off his henchmen, too. Gunbarrel Shaw might have laughed at the Marlowe gang and let them whistle for their

money, but Howard Thorpe could not do that. If he intended to stay in Elkhorn, he had to pay off.

So it was either pay them off and speed their departure out of this section of Montana, or refuse and face the unpleasant prospect of having to kill every one of the crew, all the while living under the constant strain of imminent exposure. The idea of slaying twenty men or more did not faze him, but the practicability of it was beyond accomplishment in safety.

No, if Howard Thorpe was to remain and continue to be a growing power in Montana, he had to pay off. He had to get his hands on that gold shipment! The loss of the coach and horses was crippling enough in his strained circumstances.

Tarp and Ackley who had done the job would not have to be paid now, of course. Thanks to Sheriff Harper, or somebody, he was free of that pair, but where in hell had they hidden the gold? Even Kemp didn't know that. Thorpe readily understood why. Tarp and Ackley had been treacherous enough to hide the gold for their own personal gain. And they had been paid off in lead before they'd had a chance to meet Kemp and report—or lie about it.

All Thorpe had to go on was the location of the cabin in the mountains beyond the Boxed M spread. If the gold was not there somewhere, he was sunk. And he could not go now in search of it. He dared not leave Elkhorn. Well, why should he? How was he to know that Destiny would soon be stalking him from both sides of town.

Straightening up from his short drop to the ground, he brushed off his knees and rearranged his black coat. A cool but tight little smile around his handsome lips, he l i n g e r e d long enough to take out his handkerchief and flick the dust from his boots. Then, blissfully unaware that his enemy was taking so long to die in the hotel room, unaware that Marlowe had heard him renounce his henchmen, he walked calmly along the alley and entered the rear door of the Three Fingers Saloon.

THE house was nearly deserted. Not a rancher was in sight, and most of the townsfolk had scurried home to close-herd their families. The bartender on duty was just lighting the gimbaled lamps. Two groups of men were talking together in low and uneasy tones, one group hovering near the batwing doors and taking turns peering cautiously out into the street.

At Thorpe's entrance from the rear they all started around nervously. Recognition did not bring relief. It only recalled the tragedy of the burned stagecoach which had been eclipsed temporarily by the gun riot. What was Howard Thorpe going to do about that?

The stage owner nodded coolly to everybody and halted at the back end of the bar where he rapped sharply on the counter. The bartender quit his lamp lighting job and hastened behind the bar. At Thorpe's curt order he set out a full bottle of whiskey and a glass. He tried to lighten the gloom with conversation.

"Mighty tough about yore stage, Mr. Thorpe," he offered. "Who on earth coulda done such a thing?"

"Outlaws," Thorpe said shortly, pouring himself a stiff peg and tossing it down.

"Got any idea who it was?" pursued the barkeep.

"Yes," Thorpe replied monosyllabically, repeating the drink.

The next remark he did not answer, simply standing there and staring moodily at himself in the back bar mirror. Rebuffed, the bartender returned to his work.

An hour passed in this fashion while the shaken Thorpe rearranged his

thoughts. It was completely dark outdoors and his bottle was half-empty when the first shots sounded up the street from the direction of the coachyard.

An ashen-faced man came running into the saloon.

"Raiders!" he gulped. "I seen 'em from the Tomahawk. They're wreckin' the stage office. The leader is Bass Marlowe! I—"

He caught sight of Howard Thorpe's tall figure and broke off. Thorpe had jerked around at his words. Now he started for the door at a run. With no guards at the yard to protect it, there was no telling what damage would be done.

Marlowe! If Marlowe and his gang had come to town, they had come for the express purpose of being paid. Thorpe had promised prompt settlement, but he was not prepared tonight to make it. He would have to face them, get them out of town before they ruined him.

"Better not go, Thorpe," advised a man from one of the groups. "Yuh can't do nothin' alone."

Without vouchsafing a reply the stage owner pushed through the swinging doors, standing fully revealed in the light for a moment just as the van of a solid group of riders came galloping along from the west end of the street. Thorpe halted on the edge of the walk, letting the batwings blink back into place behind him.

He knew at once who these men were. The man he knew as Reese was leading them. In the crowd of riders were both sheep and cattle ranchers. So they had quit fighting for some reason.

The stage owner smiled. Things were working out even better than he had planned. Let them go and exterminate the Marlowe band for him. It would save him trouble and expense. He wheeled and started along the street in a steady walk toward the disturbance, out of the corner of his flashing eyes watching the riders stream past.

BUT Howard Thorpe had reckoned without Steve Reese's knowledge and wide powers of observation. The ace Association man had seen him clearly delineated in the light of the saloon for that fraction of a second as he passed.

Without a change in the pace of his horse he pulled over until he was knee to knee with Hank Ball.

"You and Dusty take the lead," he said tersely. "I just saw Howard Thorpe. I'll get him."

He swung his mount sharply and turned off through a wide gap between two buildings. Dismounting in the dark, he turned his horse loose. He was on the wrong side of the street and had to wait until all fifty horsemen galloped by. Then he walked calmly across the street.

The street was pretty dark, lighted only here and there by the glow from the doors and windows of the saloons. The fronts of all the other buildings were black. In the uncertain shadows he missed the stage owner. Thorpe had disappeared.

As he halted at the edge of the walk and frowned, he heard the sound of a man running. Thorpe had suddenly decided to be in at the death and had started to run along with the galloping troop. Instantly Reese set out along the dust of the street, his feet making little noise in the velvety cushion beneath.

The gun flashes lit up the night far ahead. Howls and yells rent the air. Somebody had applied a torch to the coachyard buildings. Lurid flames leaped upward in the night, transforming the darkness into a reddish yellow glare.

In the van of the hard-riding cattlemen, was Andy Jackson. He rode neck

and neck with Dusty Trail. They reached the yard together. In the growing glare of the fire Dusty saw the slight figure of the man Roberts, cut off from his horse, vault the corral fence and start for one of the coach horses.

"There goes the murderer of yore pa, Andy," he said laconically. "I'm holdin' my fire for yuh."

Young Jackson saw, and his face became deadly pale. He gigged his mount and the animal leaped forward. Hard at his heels rode Bill Elwood. Dusty turned his attention to help Hank direct the surrounding of the rest of the surprised gang.

Straight at the fence Jackson sent his mount. As the mustang slid to a halt against the barrier, Jackson was out of the saddle and over the fence. And still the bleak-featured Elwood followed him.

Roberts was trying to catch one of the alarmed and plunging horses.

"Roberts!" called the Tumbling J man, and at the very tone of his voice the world seemed to the outlaw to stand still.

He whirled around, recognized his accoster, and backed away toward the fence. Settling in the crouch of a killer, his hand was ready to grab the butt of his gun. Neither man noticed that Elwood had leaped from his horse and was running along the side of the fence to climb it at the corner post.

"Roberts," said young Jackson in a terrible voice, "you killed my father that day in the courtroom. And for that I'm gonna tear out yore heart."

The outlaw licked his lips and sneered. And his hand flashed for his gun. Jackson, approaching on slow but steady feet, drew at the same time. But the outlaw's gun spoke first.

STILL in his deadly crouch, Roberts fired, his bullet striking Andy Jackson in the left forearm. The shock made the young rancher drop his gun from his right hand. But he didn't falter. The insane lust to come at grips physically with the treacherous killer was almost a pain. He lusted to grab that lean throat and beat the fellow into a pulp with his bare hands.

It was crazy. He wouldn't have stood a chance if Bill Elwood had not suddenly taken a hand. The sheepman's gun roared once just as Roberts was about to trigger another shot. The outlaw's right fist went numb and spurted blood as his weapon was shot away.

"I reckon that sorta evens the odds," Elwood said grimly. "Take him, son."

And Andy Jackson did. It was a brutal minute. Like a pair of wild animals the two enemies crashed together. Whatever else he might have been, Roberts was no coward, and he knew he was fighting for his life. But he was battling against the pent-up hatred and rage and grief of weeks, which had at last found the proper outlet.

Jackson literally made good his threat with his one undamaged hand. Bill Elwood, his bleak eyes looking like the snow on the distant mountain peaks, stood there and watched, his own rage gradually passing out of his heart with the action of Andy Jackson. He stood, unmoved, while the young man battered the killer's face into an unrecognizable pulp. Then at last, when Jackson finally had his antagonist on the ground and was choking out his life, Elwood intervened.

"I reckon yuh've worked off enough steam, son," he said gently, laying a restraining hand on Jackson's shoulder. "Better save enough of the sidewinder for hangin'."

Slowly Andy Jackson got to his feet, leaving the bloody wreck of his mortal foe unconscious on the ground.

"I guess yuh're right, Elwood," he sobbed. "And I want to thank yuh for what yuh did."

The rest of the round-up was a matter of moments. Trapped by a far

larger band of men than their own number, men they had not dreamed of expecting, the Marlowe gang was all but exterminated. Only by the heroic efforts of Hank Ball and Dusty Trail were any prisoners taken. But in the end every outlaw was accounted for, tallied by Dusty Trail, except the outlaw leader himself. Bass Marlowe was not with his gang.

At the first sign of attack Bass Marlowe, who was rummaging ruthlessly through the coach office, darted out and dodged down into the shadows. Craftily he started running along the darkest side of the street in the direction from which the attack had come. He mouthed foul curses at Dusty Trail and Howard Thorpe as he ran. He had to live to get even with those men. Both of them had betrayed him.

Then, in the light of a saloon across the way he saw the running figure of Howard Thorpe. He halted in his flight and crouched against the side of a frame building.

"Thorpe!" he yelled.

The stage owner spun around and froze in his tracks, facing the far side of the street. Clearly he was outlined in the lurid glare of the flames from his own buildings.

"Marlowe!" he shouted in a terrible voice. "Yuh treacherous dog!"

"And here's somethin' for yore own treachery!" snarled the outlaw.

HIS gun bellowed just as the stage owner drew his own weapon and returned the fire. Twenty paces away Steve Reese was running forward like mad, both guns drawn. But the two strange duellists were oblivious to his presence as they blazed away at each other.

Marlowe had all the advantage because he was in shadow, while Thorpe was fully limned in the glare of the fire. After his fourth shot, Thorpe stiffened. His gun dropped from his lax hand and he began to crumple at the knees. Steve Reese reached his side just in time to catch his slumping form against his chest. Marlowe's gun roared one more time to make sure of the job. That was a fatal mistake.

The cattle detective's right-hand gun spoke once almost under the nose of the sagging Thorpe. Marlowe uttered a choking cry, clawed at his throat, and pitched forward into the glare of the street.

Silence fell like a pall. Only the roaring of the flames up the street broke the stillness. Then from the saloon at Steve Reese's back, several men came slowly out to watch in goggle-eyed amazement as the Association man lowered the dead weight of Thorpe's body to the walk.

He knelt to examine the man. The stage owner was not dead, although badly wounded in the stomach. He looked up at Reese's face in wonder.

"Did yuh get Marlowe?" he asked.

"Plumb center, as you Westerners say," answered Reese.

"Thanks," breathed Thorpe. "I couldn't see him any too well myself. Who in hell are yuh, anyway, Reese?"

"It won't make you any happier to know that I'm a Protective Association man, Thorpe."

Footsteps sounded along the walk. Hank and Dusty, followed by Sheriff Harper and Judge Tankard, arrived.

"Doc! Doc!" they cried. "Are yuh all right? Did yuh get him?"

"Yes and no," Reese answered. "Marlowe got him, but I got Marlowe."

"Glory be!" cried Judge Tankard's booming voice. "That accounts for the whole kaboodle—all except that miscreant Gunbarrel Shaw."

"On the contrary, Judge," said Reese, "that accounts for all of them. Howard Thorpe is Gunbarrel Shaw."

"What?" yelled the judge incredulously.

"Ask him for yourself," said Reese. "He gave himself away when he pistol-whipped Thaddeus Kemp before shoot-

ing him. You might look at his bloody gun barrels for proof of his identity. They've got special ridges on the under sides."

"Damn you, Reese!'' groaned Thorpe. "Yuh're too smart to be human. You never saw me before yuh come here."

"I'm too smart to be inhuman, Thorpe. You almost reformed and had a chance to go straight, but you couldn't settle matters peaceably with Thad Kemp, so you reverted to your old tactics."

"Well, I'll jest be damned!" boomed Judge Tankard. "Nursin' a viper in our bosom without knowin' it. Judge Colt, he said, wearin' a mask and sluggin' a minister—I mean a judge, over the head. Well, here's where Judge Colt resigns the bench to Judge Lynch."

"I'm sorry, Judge," Reese said softly, "but you won't hang Howard Thorpe. He is, to use your own expression, taking the gun trail to glory."

REESE got to his feet.

"I guess that winds up the case. Harper, your sister is locked in her room at the hotel, and I think she's getting mighty anxious to see her brother by this time. Better take Andy Jackson along with you. And say—if things pan out like I think they might, Elsie Kemp is going to be needing a man out on the T K. I guess you can take a hint."

"Yuh bet yore bottom dollar we can!" Sheriff Harper smiled, and turned to go hunt up the owner of the Tumbling J.

"I guess you three men will stay long enough to see me perform a couple of marriage ceremonies, seeing's as how there ain't to be many hangin's," said Judge Tankard humorously.

"You bet," Hank Ball promptly announced. "I shore like the celebratin' at weddin's."

"Yuh couldn't pull us away," added Dusty Trail. "Nobody's give me a decent see-gar since my Aunt Matilda married a steamboat captain."

But Hank and Dusty were badly mistaken about staying for any wedding celebrations. For already clouds of dark trouble indirectly caused by the opening of Montana as a cattle country were forming in the panhandle of Oklahoma, where strong men erected barricades to prevent the passage of trail herds across their lands, where the guns of a Winchester quarantine were already booming.

It was a place where the three aces of the Cattlemen's Protective Association were badly needed. And nothing ever interfered with duty's call to those three men.

Next Issue: WINCHESTER WAR, a Complete Book-Length Novel

● Thin-blade shavers, here's good news for you. Gillette announces a Thin Blade of true Gillette quality at a price you'll be glad to pay. Precision-made to fit your razor perfectly, it gives real shaving comfort at a big saving. Ask your dealer for *Thin Gillettes* in the new red-black package.

RIDERS OF THE WESTERN TRAILS

TRUE SAGAS OF THE OLD WEST

1895

TOM HORN ROUTS THE RUSTLERS OF COON HOLE

COON HOLE, JUST SOUTH OF THE COLORADO LINE, AND CLOSE TO THE BOUNDARIES OF WYOMING AND UTAH, WAS THE RENDEZVOUS OF A GANG OF CATTLE RUSTLERS WHO TERRORIZED THREE STATES

LET THIS BE A WARNING TO ALL OFFICERS OF THE LAW!! THE COON HOLE GANG

ONCE A POSSE CAME UPON THE RUSTLERS ENGAGED IN STEALING EIGHT HUNDRED HEAD OF CATTLE. THE THIEVES SHOT THE CATTLE AND PITCHED THEIR CARCASES INTO THE GRAND CANYON TO DESTROY EVIDENCE AGAINST THEMSELVES

LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS REFUSED TO ACT!

NOT ME! I WOULDN'T BE ALIVE FIVE MINUTES IF I ENTERED COON HOLE!

FINALLY THE RANCHERS HIRED TOM HORN—

WE KNOW OF YOUR FINE RECORD WITH THE PINKERTONS. WE FEEL THAT IF THE LEADERS OF THE COON HOLE GANG WERE KILLED, THE RUSTLERS WOULD DISPERSE. AND HAVE NO COMPUNCION -- THEY ARE ALL FUGITIVES FROM JUSTICE, WANTED FOR MURDER AND ROBBERY FROM TEXAS TO MONTANA!

TOM HORN RODE INTO THE HILLS ABOUT COON HOLE AND HID HIS NEW .30-30 WINCHESTER RIFLE

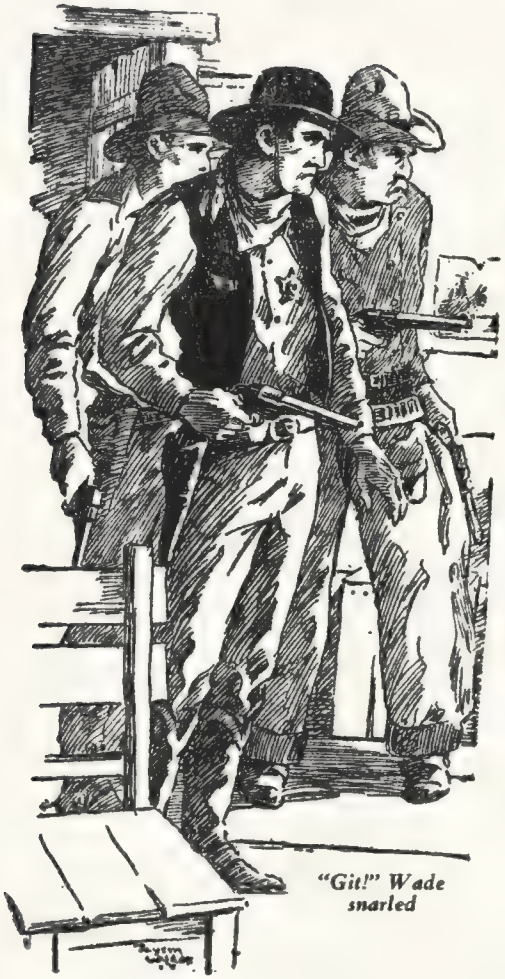
THIS TYPE OF GUN HAS NEVER BEEN SEEN IN THESE PARTS. THE RUSTLERS MUST NOT KNOW I HAVE IT!

HORN WON THE ACCLAIM OF THE RUSTLERS BY BREAKING IN THEIR WILDEST BRONCHO—

HE'S OKAY, RASH, NO DEPUTY CAN RIDE LIKE THAT!

HE BECAME AN ACCEPTED MEMBER OF THE GANG. WISHING TO AVOID BLOODSHED, HORN SLIPPED WARNING NOTES ON THE BUNKS OF THE FIVE LEADERS

HORN HAD CLEVERLY PLACED A WARNING NOTE ON HIS OWN BUNK.
I GOT ONE OF THE NOTES, TOO. MAYBE WE'D ALL BETTER CLEAR OUT!
NO DOUBLE-CROSSING SKUNK IS GOING TO SCARE ME OUT OF COON HOLE!
ME, EITHER.
HORN FOLLOWED MATT RASH, ONE OF THE LEADERS, TO HIS CABIN IN THE HILLS—
YOU'RE TOO SLOW ON THE DRAW, MATT!
I'LL PLACE MY SIGNATURE, THIS .30-30 SHELL, ON MATT'S BODY. THERE'S NOT ANOTHER GUN LIKE IT AROUND HERE. THE GANG WILL THINK SOME OUTSIDER IS WIPING THEM OUT!
FROM A GREAT PILE OF BOULDERS, HORN SHOT DOWN ISHAM BART, THE GIANT NEGRO RUSTLER
COMING UPON TWO MORE OF THE RUSTLERS BRANDING A STOLEN COW, HORN SHOT IT OUT WITH THEM, KILLING BOTH OF THEM—
THE REMAINING RUSTLERS BECAME TERRIFIED.
--ALL DEAD--THE FOUR OF THEM, AND A STRANGE SHELL ON EACH BODY. NOBODY HERE OWNS A GUN LIKE THAT!
FOUR OF THE SIX WHO GOT WARNINGS! TOM HORN AND ME ARE NEXT. IT'S SOME STRANGER!
I TELL YOU, IT'S SPOOKY. NOBODY'S SEEN A STRANGER NOR SIGNS OF ONE ABOUT THESE PARTS. SUCH HAPPENINGS JUST AIN'T NATURAL--I'M GETTING SCARED
AS THE LAST OF THE BANDIT LEADERS RODE OUT IN SEARCH OF THE MYSTERIOUS KILLER, TOM HORN SHOT HIM FROM HIS HORSE, WOUNDING HIM SERIOUSLY—
THIS LAST SHOOTING WAS TOO MUCH FOR THE RUSTLERS. PANIC-STRICKEN, THEY FLED FROM COON HOLE—
THERE THEY GO, SCATTERING IN ALL DIRECTIONS. THEY'VE EVEN FIRED THEIR BUILDINGS. THAT'S THE END OF THE COON HOLE GANG!
NEXT ISSUE—ANOTHER TRUE SAGA OF THE WEST—



"Git!" Wade snarled

The Wyoming Waddy

When a Dead Man Calls, Dan Barker Is Hell-bent for a Rapid Gun Show-down!

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Guns Across the Border," "Lone Star Silver," etc.

THE lanky, lean-cheeked stranger rode down the one street of Calhoun, dismounted in front of the Water Hole, hitched his big sorrel to the rail, and paused to stare for a moment back over the way he had come.

The plains rolled out to the horizon and dipped below it with the curve of the earth. A somber light crept into the stranger's eyes. He was thinking that it was a long way he had come, and that there were many horizons between Texas and Wyoming, between him and home.

Home? He had no home.

He went into the saloon. The usual scene presented itself—the same scene he had beheld a score of times on his way southward. Yet there was something different in it, which he felt almost immediately—there was little conversation and no laughter. The faro dealer wore a sheriff's badge. And the faces of the men, with one exception, were hard.

The one exception was a peg-legged, elderly man who sat apart from the others and puffed with seeming contentment on a corn-cob pipe. To him the stranger went and inquired the way to Boot Hill.

The stranger's voice was soft and mellow, and for that reason, perhaps, he fell into immediate disfavor with the Water Hole's occupants. They were men, evidently, who esteemed the howl of a wolf more than the bleat of a lamb. But "Peg-Leg" responded courteously, and there was a faint

gleam of excitement in his kindly eyes.

"Over east a piece, straight out o' town. Yuh can't miss it."

The stranger thanked him and went out. Fifteen minutes later he was standing beside a grave marked by a wooden slab which bore the inscription:

HERE LIES
SHERIFF JOHN BARKER
With A Bullet In His Back
Nuff Said

The stranger took off his hat.

"I've come back, Paw," he said softly.

Suddenly, aware of a presence at his back, he whirled.

But it was only Peg-Leg, dismounting from a mule.

"So you've come," said Peg-Leg.

"Yes, I've come," said the stranger. "I guess you're Peg-Leg Pete Lorimer, the vet, who wrote to me after—after Paw—died."

Lorimer nodded. "Yore paw left a will, which he give into my keeping. I'll read it to yuh."

Lorimer pulled a single sheet of paper from his pocket and read:

"'I, John Barker, knowin' the unsartinties of this life, an' the unsartinties in pertickeler of the life of a lawman, do hereby make my will.

"'To my friend, Peter Lorimer, I leave whatever money I have at the time of my death, to take care of him in his old age.

"'To my son, Daniel, who I ain't seen in ten years, not since the night we fit an' I thrashed him, an' who went away from me then an' never came back, I leave my request for his forgiveness, on account of what I forgave him in my heart long ago—an' I also leave him my guns an' my sheriff's badge.

"'When the honest people o' Calhoun County elected me sheriff, they gave me the privilege o' pickin' my own successor. I'm pickin' him—my son, Dan Barker. That's all. That's all I got to leave him, an' I hope it brings him home.'"

Handing over the paper, Lorimer said: "I hope yuh don't hold it ag'in yore dad that he left me his money."

Dan Barker shook his head. "Reckon Paw figured I could always take care of myself. I hope it was enough to keep yuh."

"There wasn't any," Lorimer said. "Yore dad always carried it in his money belt. When his body was found, both his inside belt an' his outside belt was gone. I reckon yuh don't have to believe what I'm goin' to say, but I'll say it anyway. I wouldn't have kept that money, whatever it was. It belonged to you, his blood-kin, an' I'd a-given it to yuh—"

"An' I wouldn't a-taken it."

"Yuh ain't still bitter ag'in him, are yuh? Yuh ain't held the grudge that long, have yuh? *He* didn't."

AGAIN Dan Barker shook his head. "Reckon we were both too proud to make the first move to git together again—too proud an' too stubborn. What separated us was sheep. I didn't like 'em. Paw was a sheep-man. But there was somethin' in me that went out to cows an' horses. I couldn't stay on our little ranch. I kept wanderin' over to the moolies.

"Paw was hurt an' shamed. He tried talkin' to me. It didn't work. He tried talkin' the last night we were together. Then he said: 'Son, I'm done talkin'. I've been afraid o' this for a long time, but it's come.'

"I knew what he meant—he was goin' to thrash me—figgered it was his duty—an' hated it. But I was only a kid, though large-sized an' strong—an' a kid can't read beneath, into an older man's heart.

"'I'm too old an' big to thrash,' I said, an' he answered: 'A son ain't too

old 'til he's of age to vote.'

"After it was over I went away, got a job on the Box-R as chore boy, got to be top hand an' finally ramrod. I never saw Paw again. I heard he sold out. I didn't know until today that he put his guns in the service o' the law. Who killed him?"

"I dunno," said Lorimer.

"If Paw wanted me to be sheriff, how come there's an hombre in the Water Hole wearin' a sheriff's badge?"

"That's Garth Wade. He made hisself sheriff."

"How come?"

"How come!" the one-legged vet suddenly ejaculated. "How come Calhoun is a hang-dog town now? How come honest folk moved out of it? How come the county is a rustlers' paradise now? How come Garth Wade has got the county in his pocket? When yore paw died, the law died with him. An' if yuh ask me, that was *why* he died!"

DAN BARKER'S jaws tightened. "How come you're still here?"

"I've got a wooden leg, I'm a cripple," retorted Lorimer. "An' Garth Wade is superstitious about cripples—he's scared to harm 'em."

"I see," Young Barker murmured. "An' Garth Wade is sheriff."

"Yes."

"An' I've come home.'

"Yes."

"Because home is where yore kinfolk are. An' my kin-folk are here."

"An' Paw made me sheriff. . . ."

"Yes."

"Well, a sheriff has got to have a badge. Where's my Paw's guns?"

"Here—I've got 'em right here, on my mule."

"Take mine, an' I'll slip Paw's in these here stables. . . Sure enough, they fit. . . ."

Once again that morning the Wyoming waddy went through the batwing doors of the Water Hole. Pegleg Lorimer hobbled in behind him.

The Wyoming waddy went halfway across the floor and stopped, facing Garth Wade. His mellow voice rose in the queer silence.

"I'll trouble you for that badge, mister," he said.

Wade stood up slowly. Two other men rose with him.

"What in hell are yuh talkin' about, stranger?" Wade drawled.

"I'm Dan Barker, John Barker's son," the Wyoming waddy rapped. "My father made me sheriff in accordance with the privilege granted him by the good people o' Calhoun. This document I hold in my hand is his will. I'll read yuh the pertainin' part . . ." He did so.

"Now," he said when he had finished. "I'll trouble yuh to hand over my badge."

"Come an' get it," Garth Wade drawled softly.

Dan Barker's hands hung loosely at his sides. He shook his head. "Take the badge off an' bring it to me," he said.

The next instant Wade's gun was out. One of his companions was only a fraction of a second behind him. The other drew more slowly and let his gun hang. Dan Barker's hands still dangled at his sides.

"Git!" Wade snarled.

Dan Barker's eyes narrowed. "I'm waitin' for my badge, Wade," he said softly.

"Yuh had guns in yore holsters," Wade said, drawling again. "If yuh wanted somethin', why didn't yuh draw down for it while yuh had the chance. That's what guns are for. Well, in this country—" Wade's voice suddenly speeded up—"a man don't get but one chance, an' when his loop falls short, he heads for Boot Hill—!"

In that fraction of a second the Wy-

oming waddy knew what was meant —he was going to be shot down in defiance of the whole accepted code of the West, without being given a chance to draw!

BUT shouldn't he have known it? Hadn't his father been shot in the back?

"I'm goin' home," the thought flashed through his mind. "Home is where yore kin-folk are. So I'm goin' home to Boot Hill, where Paw is. But that wasn't what he wanted—"

Even as he was thinking, he went into a violent crouch and his hands shot with lightning-like speed to his guns. The Water Hole thundered instantly with gunfire. Then something *whizzed* over Dan Barker's head, something long and heavy—perhaps the strangest weapon that had ever been brought into play in all the barroom battles of the West. It was Peg-Leg Lorimer's wooden leg!

It crashed into Garth Wade's gun hand, smashed the hand against his chest, following it—sent Wade crashing against the men who were siding him, causing their guns to spit lead into the floor.

From behind Dan Barker came the voice of Lorimer, crackling and menacing, and Dan Barker knew that the old vet was covering the other occupants of the saloon with the guns of the son of John Barker.

But Dan Barker did not shoot, though he had plenty of opportunity to drill Garth Wade and the two others in that triple scramble of theirs in the corner. Instead he hurled his body forward, went crashing into them before they had fully recovered their gun-legs.

His gun barrel went up and down twice, laid open the skulls of Wade's companions, while his free fist crashed against Wade's jaw and stunned him. Then he did a queer thing.

He ripped Wade's belt off, stood up, stepped back.

Wade came out of his daze, rose slowly, his face contorted.

"Keep 'em covered, Peg-Leg," Dan Barker roared. "I've got some work to do. Drop yore gun, Wade. I'm droppin' mine. Drop it or I'll drill yuh. That's right. Now, Wade—"

The Wyoming waddy said no more, but proceeded to administer a sound trashing with the belt. Then, panting, he said:

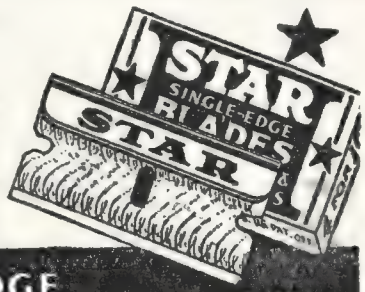
"Now pick up yore gun an' holster it. I'm still coverin' yuh, but as soon as yore gun's stabled, I'll stable mine. Then I'll do what yuh said I should have done in the first place. I'll draw down on yuh. But you'll have the same chance. That's right, Wade. Now I'll do the same with mine. She's done . . . now draw—!"

The Wyoming waddy did a second

(Concluded on page 127)

WHAT HAPPENED TO CROSS-PATCH?

Folks call him "Smiles" since he discovered those keen Star Single-edge Blades. His tender skin is now happy. His lion whiskers march off like a lamb. Famous since 1880, there are 4 sharp Stars in every 10¢ package. Star Blade Division, Brooklyn, N. Y.



STAR SINGLE-EDGE BLADES 4 FOR 10¢
FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

HANGING EVIDENCE

With Iron-Bound Fists a Range Ranny Avenges a Brutal Bushwhacking!

By

GALEN C. COLIN

Author of "Cold Steel—Texas Style," "Smoke Saunders," etc.

His granite fist shot out and caught the burly ruffian on the chin

BECAUSE dawn was lighting the eastern sky with its soft pink, and the dew was glistening on the short buffalo grass—because the meadowlarks were whistling in the clumps of bunch grass that grew lush on the slopes of the sand hills, was no reason for a young waddy to forget that he was carrying five thousand dollars in cash, and was in a new country.

Many a man had stopped a slug here in these hills, just because he'd been careless for a few minutes. "Buck" Adair should have known that—probably did. But right now the prairie dawn got under his skin. He swung a long leg over his saddle horn, slacked the reins and let his mind wander as his eyes drank in the hills.

Two days ago he had left the Block Diamond spread, headed for Dalhart. In his inside pocket reposed a worn leather wallet stuffed with big bills.

And in the stock-yards at the little cow-town were two hundred yearlings which would be his when the money changed hands.

The yearlings were grass-fat, and worth much more than the twenty-five dollars apiece that "Big Mike" Kroger of the Bar K outfit asked for them. A smile flicked across Buck Adair's face as he thought of them. Life was good to the young puncher. Only twenty-three, and already he had a spread to be proud of. Even credit enough at the Rountree Bank to borrow the necessary five thousand for the yearlings.

He drew in a deep breath of the tangy, sage-scented air, threw back his head and lifted his clear tenor in the words of an old range song:

> I've traveled lots of country,
> Nebraska's hills of sand,
> Down through the Indian Nation
> An' up the Rio Grande—

The rangy buckskin horse topped the crest of a steep sand hill, and slithered down the other slope. Buck braced himself instinctively in his stirrups, his eyes still half closed and his mind far away. The horse planted its feet firmly and came to a dead stop just at the end of an abrupt shoulder of bare sand at the foot of the slope.

BUCK ADAIR straightened in the saddle, jerked back to the present. His eyes popped open as he attempted to swing his leg down from the saddle-horn. His gaze barely caught the taut rope stretched across the trail. He had only a fleeting impression of a huge, sprawling shape hurtling down from the outjutting shoulder of sand above him. Then the form landed on his back. A hand, grasping the butt of a long six-gun, rose and fell. A million stars danced a jig in front of Adair's eyes. Dimly he felt himself falling.

When he awoke it was a throbbing agony in his head. His eyes blinked open, stared into a brassy sky, with the sun nearing the zenith. For a full five minutes he hardly moved, for a numbing weakness held his nerves and muscles. At last, with slow, weary effort he forced himself to a sitting position.

A grunt of amazement burst from his swollen lips. For his hazy eyes held squarely upon his own bare feet. Then he saw that his chaps were gone, and the gun-belt from around his middle. Barefooted, bareheaded — and afoot.

He staggered to his feet, his mouth a grim, straight line. He forced his mind to steady thought, to the memory of the few moments before he had been knocked out. Only faintly he recalled the rope across the trail and the huge form dropping upon him. He shook his head grimly.

"Slugged and robbed by a hombre I wouldn't know if I met him square in the middle of the trail!" he grunted. "Wanderin' along like a tenderfoot dry-farmer! Ought to had more sense!"

He tried a staggering step, but his knees were still wabbly. Abruptly he sat down in the sand again, heedless of the blistering sun. He closed his eyes against the glare as his brain began to clear. Slowly the bewildered feeling gave way to smoldering wrath.

"That bushwhacker knowed I was carryin' that money!" he muttered. "And that means he come from Dalhart. Likely Big Mike Kroger was free with his tongue, and some hombre heard him."

Slowly, steadily he heaved his body erect, planted his bare feet firmly in the hot sand. His narrowed gaze swept the trail toward Dalhart. A dozen miles of sand hills, shimmering in the sun, separated him from the town.

"He come from Dalhart—and he'll be headin' back that way! His trail is my trail, and I'm takin' it!"

Hitching his levis higher on his hips, he gritted his teeth and swung into the trail. His shoulders were straight now, and his chin high. I the searing sand bit deep, his square, bronzed

face did not show the pain.

The sun was dipping redly below the western horizon when the young puncher staggered down the last sage-brush-studded sandhill and halted on the bank of the shallow little Rio Concha. With a grunt of relief, he slumped on the bank and dipped his blistered feet into the warm water.

As the water soaked the pain from his feet, he studied the drab, sprawling town that lay just a half mile beyond the stream. The rusty streaks of steel upon which a train ran three times a week, then the stock-yards in which he could see moving shapes that would be Big Mike's two-hundred yearlings, and beyond that, the two blocks of saloons and false-fronted stores.

AT the hitch-rails in front of the saloons, saddled horses were lined in almost solid rank. Buck Adair's thinned lips twisted in a mirthless smile. Dalhart was plenty tough and wild. Probably a hundred of the three hundred men in the little town would bushwhack a man for much less than five thousand dollars.

An almost hopeless task to find one of this hundred—a man he would not know if he should meet him face to face. But his teeth clicked, and his hands clenched at his sides.

For a full half hour Buck Adair sat hunched on the bank of the Rio Concha, his feet drinking in the tepid water. But at last the swift prairie twilight changed to darkness. Lights flickered up in Dalhart, as the little town seemed to come alive.

Adair rose and placed his tender feet on the sand of the trail, already cooling fast. He gritted his teeth.

"Only a half mile more! Reckon they'll make it!"

He crossed the railroad track and skirted the stock-yards. Two men were hunched on the high top rail of the yards like a pair of buzzards on a limb, but their backs were toward the young puncher, and they did not turn. Once past them, Adair turned sharply to the right and headed for the livery barn at the west end of the street.

It was a little too much to expect that the bushwhacker had left his buckskin horse there, but it was worth a look. And even if the cayuse wasn't in the barn, he might borrow a pair of boots and maybe a six-gun.

A dim light shone from the little office room at the left of the wide door. Peering through the dingy window Adair saw a wizened, gray mustached old man sucking on a stubby pipe, as he hunched in a chair much too big for him. Nobody else was in sight.

Adair stepped gingerly to the closed door and rapped sharply upon it. He heard dragging footsteps, then a high-pitched, rasping voice from inside.

"Who is it? If yuh're one of the Bar K outfit, yuh'd jest as well head back to the One-Eyed Jack Saloon!

"Stranger! Name of Buck Adair, from down Dry Mesa way! Honin' to make a little peaceable talk with yuh."

"Stranger, huh? Open the door—but remember I've got a smoke-pole coverin' yuh that'll blast a hole through yuh!"

"Ain't heeled, myself," Adair answered, as he lifted the latch and pushed the door open.

He stepped inside and stood facing the grim little hombre. For a moment the man's eyes were wide with amazement. Then a twisted smile quirked the corners of his lips. His right hand held the butt of a long-barreled six-gun unwaveringly, but his left lifted and brushed his grizzled mustache.

"Well blast me for a horned-toad, if yuh shore don't look like somethin' the coyotes been playin' with! What happened to yuh? Been mixed up with them Bar K mavericks?"

Adair shook his head, and in spite of himself a slow smile spread across his face.

"I kin talk a heap better, if I kin take a load off'n my feet. They're nigh

blistered raw, what with plowin' through twelve miles of hot sand—barefoot."

"Twelve miles—barefoot?" The old man's jaw dropped, and he gestured toward the big chair. "Set, feller—and tell me about it!"

ADAIR sunk gratefully into the chair, and drew a long breath of relief. In swift words he sketched what had happened. The old man nodded slowly. When Adair had finished, he rose and shuffled into the saddle-room. In a moment he returned, lugging a pair of boots and a filled six-gun belt.

"Here yuh are, son! The boots'll fit, and the six-guns hold true! If I was a mite younger, I'd trail with yuh!"

"Ain't hollerin' for help. But if yuh could kind o' give me a hint where to start lookin', I'd be a heap obliged. I take it yuh ain't none too set on that Bar K outfit. The boss, Big Mike Kroger, is the hombre I was aimin' to do business with."

"Big Mike Kroger is a crook, and his riders are pizen!" the little man rasped. "When they show up in Dalhart, honest men hunt their holes!"

"Yuh mean Big Mike might be—"

The old man's eyes narrowed. "You and me know, feller, that one hombre at least was lookin' for yuh in today, luggin' five thousand dollars. And he ain't none too good to bushwhack yuh."

Buck Adair's jaw set in square, grim lines. He pulled on the boots, wincing as his blistered feet crowded into them. He rose and buckled the gun-belt around his middle.

"Where'd I likely find Big Mike?"

"The One-Eyed Jack Saloon, third from the end in the next block. Yuh'll know it by the carousin' yuh hear. Big Mike takes it over when him and his mavericks come to town."

Adair turned and strode toward the door. The old man's voice followed.

"Keep yore back to the wall—and

(Continued on Page 122)

FREE TRIAL OFFER

NEW REMINGTON NOISELESS PORTABLE!

AS LITTLE AS 10¢ A DAY

Money Back Guarantee
10-Day Free Trial Offer

AT LAST! The famous Remington Noiseless Portable that speaks in a whisper is available for as little as 10c a day. Here is your opportunity to get a real Remington Noiseless Portable guaranteed by the factory. Equipped with all attachments that make for complete writing equipment. Standard keyboard. Automatic ribbon reverse. Variable line spacer and all the conveniences of the finest portable ever built. PLUS the NOISELESS feature. Act now while this special opportunity holds good. Send coupon TODAY for details.

YOU DON'T RISK A PENNY

We send this Remington Noiseless Portable direct to you with 10 days FREE trial. If you are not satisfied, send it back. WE PAY ALL SHIPPING CHARGES.

● FREE TYPING BOOKLET

With your new Remington Noiseless Portable we will send you—absolutely FREE—a 24-page booklet on typing. It teaches the Touch System, used by all expert typists. It is simply written and completely illustrated. Instructions are as simple as A, B, C. Even a child can easily understand this method. A little study and the average person, child or adult, becomes fascinated. Follow this booklet's instructions during the 10-Day Trial Period we give you with your typewriter and you will wonder why you ever took the trouble to write letters by hand.

● SPECIAL CARRYING CASE

Also under this new Purchase plan, we will send to you with every Remington Noiseless Portable, a special carrying case sturdily built of 3 ply wood. This handsome case is covered with heavy du Pont fabric. The top is removed by one motion, leaving the machine firmly attached to the base. This makes it easy to use your Remington anywhere—on knees, in chairs, on trains. Don't delay...send in the coupon for complete details!

SEND COUPON WHILE LOW PRICES HOLD

Remington Rand Inc. Dept. 169-2
465 Washington St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Tell me, without obligation, how to get a Free Trial of a new Remington Noiseless Portable, including Carrying Case and Free Typing Instruction Booklet for as little as 10c a day. Send Catalogue.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

(Continued from Page 121)
watch his draw, son! He's lightnin' with his smoke-poles, but he telegraphs his draw by closin' his left eye."

"Thanks, pardner! I'll keep my eyes open!"

As Buck Adair strode down the dusty street toward the brightly lighted saloon, he did not look back over his shoulder to see the little, bent old livery stable man dart from the office and head for a little building a half block away on a cross street. Nor did he see the stocky man with a star on his shirt front leave the building and angle toward the One-Eyed Jack. Adair was too intent upon the job.

The orange light of the swinging lamp cut through the blue, stinging smoke of the low bar-room as Adair pushed the door open and stepped inside. He halted for a moment, his gaze sweeping the hard-bitten crowd. A half dozen were lined up at the scarred bar. Others were playing at the scattered card tables. All were drinking.

The men at the card tables stiffened as the door opened, and their hands hovered over their holsters. They swept the newcomer with narrowed eyes for a moment, but apparently saw nothing dangerous about him. The men at the bar turned, and their hands darted down.

Adair eyed them in the hazy light, then strode to the bar. He called for his drink, took the glass that the bartender slid toward him, and turned his back to the bar, resting his elbows upon it behind him. Again his narrowed gaze swept the hard-bitten crowd.

He had never seen Big Mike Kroger. He was puzzling his brain over some way of singling him out without asking, as he let his gaze wander up the line of a half dozen men at the bar. Then a sharp breath hissed through his teeth, and his muscles tensed.

NEAREST him was a burly ruffian with black-stubbled face and thick body. One hairy hand held a half-filled glass and the other rested on the butt of a six-gun. Beady little eyes were fixed upon the young puncher. And instantly Buck Adair knew him as the bushwhacker—was certain, too, that he was Big Mike Kroger.

A thin, mirthless smile flicked for an instant across Adair's lips and was gone. Slowly he set the glass down upon the bar and half turned toward the big hombre. His own hands inched downward until they hovered over the butts of his borrowed six-guns.

From the corner of his eye he swept the rest of the crowd. They were intent upon their own carousing, but he knew they could snap into action on a moment's notice. The front door opened, then closed. But Adair did not take his eyes from the huge man.

He'd have to trust that Big Mike's killers would not horn in on a fair fight; that they wouldn't dare gun him from behind. It was a frayed rope to hang on, but he'd have to chance it. After all, Big Mike Kroger posed as an honest rancher, and his men as riders, rather than ruthless killers.

Buck Adair slid along the bar, widening the distance between himself and the big hombre to six or eight feet. Then he spoke, his words low.

"Hi'yuh, Kroger. Rode — and walked—a long ways to see yuh."

The burly ruffian started, and his beady little eyes blinked. Adair could see his huge fists knot until the knuckles were white. The big man leaned slightly toward the young puncher, his jaw thrust out.

"Who are you? How d'yuh know my name? I never saw yuh before!"

"Yore memory is bad, Kroger! Ain't been so long since yuh saw me. I'm Buck Adair, from down Dry Mesa way. Remember? The waddy that was headed for Dalhart to buy yore yearlin's."

"What d'yuh mean, I saw yuh?" Big Mike snarled, his hand edging toward

his holster.

"Me, I'm kind o' thinkin' I caught a glimpse of yore face this mornin'. Don't seem like I'd forget somebody that would bushwhack me, rob me and leave me twelve miles from town!"

Big Mike's jaw sagged, then tightened. Red wrath surged across his beefy face. He took a step toward Adair, lips writhing.

"Blast yuh, I'd ought to plug yuh for them words! I don't know what kind of windy yuh're tryin' to run, but yuh ain't gittin' by with it! I never saw yuh in my life!"

Buck Adair's eyes narrowed to the thinnest slits. He did not answer—simply pointed his left forefinger. Big Mike's eyes slowly dropped, widened, then jerked back to the puncher's face. But now there was killing rage mirrored in those glittering, beady eyes.

Buck Adair was not conscious of the muttering of the crowd. He did not see them edging closer, nor did he see the sudden movement from near the front door. His gaze was upon Big Mike's face—upon the man's left eye.

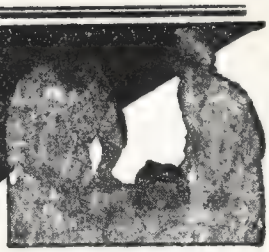
Then it came! The slow lowering of the lid, almost like a wink—the telegram of the draw about which the old hostler had warned Adair. The young puncher's nerves and muscles tensed. Big Mike's hand streaked like light for his gun butt. A sound, something like a sigh, welled up from the watchers.

THE six-gun seemed fairly to leap into the burly hombre's fist. *Crash!* A thin wisp of smoke curled upward toward the ceiling through the haze, and spread out like a cloud. The hard-bitten crowd was as silent as death for a moment. Then Big Mike's bellow of wrath and pain shook the building.

And at the same instant a low-voiced curse came from back in the crowd. A man moved, and the others parted. Another hand darted toward a filled holster. But a high-pitched, rasping

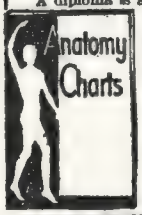
(Continued on Page 124)

Learn this Profitable Profession



... in 90 Days at Home

Hundreds of men and women of all ages 18-50 make $10.00 to $20.00 in a single day giving scientific Swedish Massage and Hydro-Therapy treatments. There is a big demand from Hospitals, Sanitariums, Clubs, Doctors and private patients as well as opportunities for establishing your own office. Learn this interesting money-making profession in your own home by mail through our home study course. Same instructors as in our NATIONALLY KNOWN resident school. A diploma is awarded upon completion of the course. Course can be completed in 3 to 4 months. High School training is not necessary. Many earn big money while learning.



Anatomy Charts and Booklet FREE

Enroll now and we will include uniform coat, medical dictionary, patented reducing roller and Hydro-Therapy supplies without extra cost. The reducing course alone may be worth many times the modest tuition fee.

Send coupon now for Anatomy Charts and booklet containing photographs and letters from successful graduates. These will all be sent postpaid—FREE.

THE College of Swedish Massage (Successor to National College of Massage)
Dept. 763—1601 Warren Boulevard, Chicago
You may send me FREE and postpaid, Anatomy Charts; booklet containing photographs and letters from graduates and complete details of your offer.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

BE A PASSENGER TRAFFIC INSPECTOR

Our Training Means Good Jobs, Good Pay

Qualify as Railway and Bus Traffic Inspector and we place you at up to $135 per month, plus expenses, to start (or refund tuition) upon completion of easy, home study course. Free Booklet gives facts.

Standard Business Training Institute,
Div. 8502 Buffalo, N. Y.

WE MATCH PANTS ToAnySuit!

Double the life of your coat and vest with correctly matched pants. 100,000 patterns. Every pair hand tailored to your measure. Our match sent FREE for your O. K. before pants are made. Fit guaranteed. Send piece of cloth or vest today.

SUPERIOR MATCH PANTS COMPANY
209 S. State St. Dept. 825 Chicago

FOREST JOBS

available at $125-$175 per month, steady. Cabin, Hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify at once.
Get details immediately
Rayson Service Bureau, B-56 Denver, Colo.

EARN EXTRA MONEY

Both men and women increase their incomes, quickly and easily at home. Wentworth supplies you with work and furnishes all materials.

FREE BOOKLET explains how we bring you pleasant and profitable employment in your own home.

WRITE TODAY
WENTWORTH PICTORIAL COMPANY, LTD.
107 WENTWORTH BLDG.
HAMILTON, ONT.

15 DAYS' TRIAL

SEND ONLY 20 CENTS with name, age and address, and by return mail **RECEIVE** a set of **14 TRIAL GLASSES** to select from to fit your eyes **NOTHING MORE TO PAY** until you can see perfectly far and near. Then the above **Beautiful Style** will cost you only $3.90, no more; other styles $1.95 and up.

We only handle **High Grade** Single Vision and **DOUBLE VISION** or **KRYPTOK BIFOCAL** toric lenses, ground into **ONE SOLID PIECE of GLASS. DOCTOR H. E. BAKER**, O.D., with over 30 years' experience, **GUARANTEES** to give you **Perfect Fit** or **NO COST.** Circular with latest styles and lowest prices **FREE.**

MODERN SPECTACLE CO., Dept. 92-AR, 5125 Pensacola Ave., Chicago, Ill.

INVENTORS

Time counts in applying for patents. Don't risk delay in patenting your invention. Send sketch or model for instructions or write for new 48-Page FREE booklet, "Patent Guide for the Inventor." No charge for preliminary information. Prompt, careful, efficient service. Clarence A. O'Brien and Hyman Berman, *Registered Patent Attorneys*, 5344 Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

Scaly Skin Trouble

PSORIASIS

Use DERMOIL. Thousands do for scaly spots on body or scalp. Sold by Liggetts and Walgreen Drug Stores. Trial bottle Dermoil FREE. Write Today. No obligation.

LAKE LABORATORIES, Box 6, Northwestern Station, Dept. T-15, Detroit, Michigan.

WANTED ORIGINAL POEMS, SONGS

For Immediate Consideration . . . . . Send poems to **COLUMBIAN MUSIC PUBLISHERS, Ltd., Dept. 30, Toronto, Can.**

PAY RAISING PLAN!

I'LL TRAIN YOU IN DRAFTING

Until You Get a GOOD PAY JOB

Easy way to get into Electricity, Aviation, Diesel, Air Conditioning or other favorite work. Draftsmen draw good pay. Spare time training at home by easy, low cost practical method. No experience needed. High School education not necessary. Complete Professional Draftsman's Tools furnished. Write today for FREE BOOK. State age.

ENGINEER DOBE, Div. 4172, Libertyville, Ill.

DICE. CARDS.

Specialties for Magicians use. Inks, Shiners, Check-Cop, Daubs. Catalog ten cents, stamps or coin.

HILL BROS., Box T, Salida, Colo.

FREE SAMPLES OF REMARKABLE TREATMENT FOR

Stomach Ulcers

(Due to Gastric Hyper-Acidity)

H. H. Bromley, of Rutland, Vt. writes: "I suffered for 10 years with acid-stomach trouble. Doctors all told me I had ulcers and would have to diet the rest of my life. Before taking your treatment I weighed 143 pounds and could eat nothing but soft foods and milk. Now, after taking Von's Tablets, I weigh 171 pounds, can eat almost anything and feel perfectly well." If you suffer from indigestion, gastritis, heartburn, bloating or any other acid stomach trouble, you, too, should receive quick relief. Send for FREE Samples of this wonderful treatment and details of guaranteed trial offer. Valuable Booklet is included. Write

PHILADELPHIA VON CO. Dept. 271-F Fox Bldg., Philadelphia, Pa.

(Continued from Page 123)

voice barked from near the door:

"Keep yore paws away from that smoke-pole, hombre — unless yuh're honin' to stop lead! This here is a fair scrap, and me and the sheriff are here to see that it stays thet way!"

Adair did not risk a glance, but the thin smile played across his lips again. The old hostler was like an aged fire-horse. He had smelled smoke and had come a-running. Then Adair shot a glance down at the smoking gun still held in his hand. He shook his head.

"Kind o' ashamed of that draw," he said softly. "Raked yore hand, Kroger, when I was only aimin' on knockin' the gun out of it! But then, these ain't my own hog-legs, as you know well enough!"

Big Mike Kroger had ceased his howling and was crouching against the bar, his left hand grasping his right wrist. Buck Adair holstered his six-gun.

"I'd ought to drill yuh center, Kroger! But I reckon a plumb good beatin' would hurt yuh worse! That's what I aim to give yuh!"

Big Mike Kroger looked up, his glittering eyes sweeping Adair. His thick lips smiled crookedly, but there was hate and murder on his beefy face. He looked around at his men, saw also the sheriff with a sawed-off shot-gun and the old hostler with a pair of guns.

"Yuh're my witness, Sheriff Moody!" he rasped. "This here hombre accused me of bushwhackin' him, and jumped me 'fore I was set! I'm countin' on you to see that it's a fair scrap from here on out—that he don't drag his smoke-poles!"

"It's you and him—without six-guns!" the sheriff rasped. "And a charge of buckshot for the first one of yore coyotes that makes a wrong move! He chose you—let him take yuh!"

A ruthless smile swept Big Mike's face, as he nodded. He outweighed

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

Buck Adair a full fifty pounds; all hard, muscular pounds. He stepped out from the bar and turned toward the waiting puncher.

"I'll tear yuh apart and heave the pieces to the buzzards, hombre!" he roared.

And at the same instant, he lowered his shaggy head and charged straight at Adair. His arms, with huge knobby fists at the ends, flailed wildly. But the young puncher sidestepped and dodged them. His own granite fist darted out like a sidewinder's strike, and caught the burly ruffian on the chin.

Big Mike bellowed like a maddened bull as he whirled to charge again. And this time Buck Adair stood, legs wide-spread and arms out like a wrestler. Big Mike grinned wickedly. If only he got his hands on that sidestepping hombre. . . . His fists streaked out savagely.

Adair swept the flailing arms aside, and his own sinewy fingers clutched Big Mike's shock of hair. And as the big ruffian lunged toward him, Adair dropped to his back, still grasping the hair.

HIS legs shot up, and his feet caught Big Mike squarely in the middle. He jerked the ruffian's head low, as his legs straightened. Big Mike Kroger screeched in fear and pain as he hurtled head-first over Adair's prone body, turned in mid-air and landed with a sickening crash on his neck and shoulders. A hoarse grunt escaped his lips. He jerked once—and lay still, completely out.

The circle of men edged forward, growling curses. But again the sheriff and the old hostler herded them back. Instantly Buck Adair was on his feet, bending over Big Mike Kroger. His fingers fumbled at the man's middle for a moment, then he straightened, a smile crossing his face.

"You, Sheriff! I'd rather you

(Continued on Page 126)

FIT-RITE TEETH BY MAIL

We make to measure, to fit you individually—BY MAIL—the World's No. 1 FIT-RITE Dental Plates for men and women—from an impression of your mouth. We have thousands of satisfied customers all over the country wearing teeth we made by mail at sensible prices.

ON 60 DAYS' TRIAL

Make us prove you can't beat our fit, work, or price. Save half or more. A dentist supervises the construction of each plate. Wear our dentures as long as 60 days.

WITH 100% MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

Then, if you are not delighted with your improved looks—if you are not 100% SATISFIED—we GUARANTEE to refund every cent you pay us. We take your word. Try FIT-RITE Plates, set with life-like, pearly-white porcelain teeth, carved and styled for good looks, comfort, and life-long wear. 48-hour service on re-making and repairing old plates. Monthly payments possible.

FREE impression material, easy directions, and catalog. WRITE ME TODAY!

C. T. JOHNSON, Pres. of

UNITED STATES DENTAL COMPANY

Dept. 282, 1555 Milwaukee Ave., Chicago

START

$1260 to $2100 YEAR

Get a 1939 Government Job

MEN—WOMEN

Short Hours
Dependable jobs
Common Education Usually Sufficient
Mail Coupon Today—SURE

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. F-260
Rochester, N. Y.

Gentlemen: Rush to me, FREE of charge, list of U. S. Government big pay jobs. Send me FREE 32-page book describing salaries, vacations, hours, work, and full particulars telling how to qualify for one of these jobs.

Name.....

Address.....

THOUSANDS INSURED FOR $1.00 A MONTH

One-Half Regular Rate First 5 Years
Policy Mailed for FREE Inspection

A new low-cost Special 20 payment Life Insurance Policy is offered without Doctor's examination. If you are in good health and under age of 55; liberal cash and loan values! Double Indemnity! **SEND NO MONEY.** No agent will call! Just write American Life and Acc. Ins. Co., 234 American Life Bldg., St. Louis, Mo., sending your full name, date of birth, race, height, weight, duties of occupation, name and relationship of your beneficiary, and condition of your health. Your policy will be mailed at once. Save by mail. Write NOW.

ANY PHOTO ENLARGED

Size 8 x 10 inches or smaller if desired. Same price for full length or bust form, groups, landscapes, pet animals, etc.; or enlargements of any part of group picture. Safe return of original photo guaranteed. **47¢** **3 for $1.00**

SEND NO MONEY Just mail photo or snapshot (any size) and within a week you will receive your beautiful enlargement, guaranteed fadeless. Pay postman 47c plus postage — or send 45c with order and we pay postage. Big 16x20-inch enlargement sent C.O.D. 78c plus postage or send 80c and we pay postage. Take advantage of this amazing offer now. Send your photos today. Specify size wanted.

STANDARD ART STUDIOS, 113 S. Jefferson St., Dept. 309-B, Chicago

SONG POEMS WANTED

TO BE SET TO MUSIC
Free Examination. Send Your Poems to
J. CHAS. McNEIL, BACHELOR OF MUSIC
4155-TF South Van Ness Los Angeles, Calif.

WILL YOU WEAR THIS SUIT and Make up to $12 in a Day!

Let me send you a fine all-wool union tailored suit **FREE OF ONE PENNY COST.** Just follow my easy plan and show the suit to your friends. Make up to $12 in a day easily. No experience — no house-to-house canvassing necessary.

Send for Samples—FREE OF COST

Write today for FREE details. ACTUAL SAMPLES and "sure-fire" money-getting plans. Send no money.

H. J. Collin, PROGRESS TAILORING CO., Dept. P-377, 500 South Throop Street, Chicago, Illinois.

FREE CAMERA AND RADIO CATALOG

NEW 1939 188 PAGE catalog

1001 BARGAINS

Save money with this big, new buying guide! 50,000 standout buys in Lafayette radios, parts, tubes, amateur equipment, television kits, cameras and photo supplies. Write for FREE copy of Catalog No. 73-20B9

WHOLESALE RADIO SERVICE CO., Inc.
100-B SIXTH AVENUE NEW YORK, N. Y.

Rheumatism Relieve Pain In Few Minutes

To relieve the torturing pain of Neuritis, Rheumatism, Neuralgia, Lumbago in few minutes, get **NURITO,** the Doctor's formula. No opiates, no narcotics. Does the work quickly—must relieve cruel pain to your satisfaction in few minutes—or money back at Druggist's. Don't suffer. Get trustworthy **NURITO** on this guarantee. Don't wait.

FALSE TEETH

LOWEST PRICES

90 DAYS' TRIAL

If you need teeth, but do not care to spend much money, **MY METHOD IS WHAT YOU WANT. MY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE** gives you 3 months to see how they fit and look. I have thousands of Satisfied Customers in United States and foreign countries. **MY SPECIAL METHOD IS FOUNDED ON 30 YEARS' EXPERIENCE.**

SEND NO MONEY

Write **TODAY** for **FREE BOOKLET** and **Material.**

DR. CLEVELAND DENTAL LABORATORY
Dept. 2-B9 503-05 Missouri Avenue, East St. Louis, Ill.

(Continued from page 125)

searched this hombre. I'll watch these here mavericks until yuh find a wallet with my money in it. I'll describe it to yuh, without lookin', so yuh'll be shore I talked straight, when I said Big Mike bushwhacked and robbed me."

The sheriff strode to Kroger's side and bent over the big man. Adair faced the Bar K riders, his hands hooked over his gun-butts. They had seen his lightning draw and did not make a move. In a scant minute the sheriff straightened, with a surprised grunt.

A smile crossed Adair's lips, for he knew what that meant.

"Old brown wallet, with the Block Diamond brand onto the side. Got three one-thousand-dollar bills and the rest of five thousand in hundreds."

"Right, son!" the sheriff said evenly.

Back in the little office of the livery stable, the sheriff drew a deep breath.

"Yuh got a bill of sale to them yearlin's—and a plenty good bargain, son. Big Mike and his outfit are headed for their spread, and they won't be comin' to Dalhart again for a good long spell. But yuh shore took a long chance in accusin' Kroger—without no evidence. If yuh'd been wrong, I'da had to jail yuh for startin' the fight."

Buck Adair grinned widely. The sheriff was right. He had a real bargain in those yearlings. Big Mike had never intended to sell them—had only used them for bait. Then he spoke softly.

"I had evidence, sheriff, as soon as I saw that watch chain hangin' out o' Big Mike's pocket. It's the only one in the world like it, with that skull-shaped nugget charm. Big Mike made a mistake in wearin' it, for yuh see it was in my pocket 'fore I was bushwhacked."

●

Read
RANGE RIDERS
EVERY ISSUE

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

THE WYOMING WADDY

(Concluded from page 116)

astounding thing—he delayed his draw! Only Peg-Leg Lorimer, though disapproving, guessed that it was in consideration of the thrashing Garth Wade had taken, equalizing things so to speak.

But Dan Barker knew that when his father had written of home he had not meant Boot Hill. His draw was like the striking of a snake, his aim was as true as his father's heart had been. Not Garth Wade's finger pulled the trigger of Garth Wade's gun, but the Wyoming waddy's bullet, plowing into Garth Wade's heart and causing his finger to trigger in reflex action!

The Boss of Calhoun toppled.

Peg-Leg Lorimer, still covering the others, came to Dan Barker's side.

"Yuh kin git word to the honest folk of the county that Calhoun is clean again," the Wyoming waddy said—he stooped, came up with the badge, pinned it to his shirt—"and that Paw's murderer is dead," he ended.

"Yuh mean—yuh mean—"

"He was wearin' paw's belt. He'd changed the buckle an' was wearin' it inside out, but I recognized it. Reckon Wade knew a good belt when he saw it—it's the kind that never wears out—or mebbe he thought it was smart to wear the belt of the man he'd killed, like In'juns wear scalps. I kin see what yore thinkin', Peg-Leg. No, Paw never used that belt on me—he only used to threaten me with it jokingly when I was a kid—take it off an' hold it up—yuh know, like fathers do. . . ."

Read Our Companion Magazine

THRILLING WESTERN

10c At All Stands

FREE

JEWELED ACCURATE

OF EXTRA CHARGE

CURVED SHOCK PROOF

Send NO MONEY with Order

Curved, "shockproof" GOLD PLATE FRONT watch with all the color and charm of natural yellow gold. Stainless back. Accurate. GUARANTEE by a famous $1,000,000 FACTORY enclosed. Watch is yours FREE of extra charge with every ring ordered NOW and paid for promptly on our easy two monthly $2 payment plan. (Total only $4.) Remember ...the cost of the watch is included in the price of the ring... You Pay Nothing Extra for the watch! Ring is solid sterling silver 925-1,000 pure, decorated in nautral yellow gold plate. State initial to be set in black simulated Onyx. Man's or lady's model.

No Charge for Credit... We trust you! No red tape. We'll ship at once. TEN DAY FREE TRIAL. Mail Postcard or Coupon NOW. Send No Money with order! Your package comes (postage paid to your door) by RETURN MAIL.

GOLD STANDARD WATCH CO., Dept. X862, Newton, Mass.
Rush offer. ☐ Lady's Model ☐ Man's Model

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

ELECTRICITY

"LEARN BY DOING" 12 weeks training

I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING!

My Big Free Book tells you how we train you in 12 weeks—to start in the growing field of Electricity—by actual shopwork on real electrical machinery—not by books or correspondence. Amazing plan enables many to get training first... then take 12 Months to pay in small monthly payments starting 5 Months from date you start school. Experience or advanced education not needed. Many Earn While Learning. Free lifetime employment service. Diesel Engines, Electric Refrigeration and Air Conditioning instruction included. MAIL COUPON for FREE BOOK and all Facts.

H. C. LEWIS, President, COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 29-84 Chicago, Ill.
Send Big Free Book with facts on Coyne training and tell me about your "Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation" Plan.
NAME_____ AGE_____
ADDRESS_____
CITY_____ STATE_____

BE A DETECTIVE

Work home or travel. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write NOW to
GEORGE T. H. WAGNER, 2640 Broadway, N. Y.

Diesel

Diesel engines are gaining favor wherever power is used. They are replacing steam and gasoline engines in power plants, motor trucks and busses, locomotives and ships, aircraft, tractors, dredges, drills, pumps, etc.—which means the well-paid jobs in these lines will go to Diesel-trained men. Write today for method of how you can prepare for one of these worthwhile jobs. No obligation.
American School, Dpt. D-258, Drexel at 58th, Chicago

Learn PHOTOGRAPHY at Home

Splendid opportunities. Prepare in spare time. Easy plan. No previous experience needed, common school education sufficient. Send for free booklet "Opportunities in Photography", particulars and requirements.
American School of Photography
3601 Michigan Ave., Dept. 1892, Chicago, Ill.

EVERY ISSUE OF COLLEGE HUMOR 15c EVERYWHERE

Back Pain and Kidney Strain

Wrong foods and drinks, worry, overwork and colds often put a strain on the Kidneys and functional kidney disorders may be the true cause of Excess Acidity, Getting Up Nights, Burning Passages, Leg Pains, Nervousness Dizziness Swollen Ankles, Rheumatic Pains, and Puffy Eyelids. Help your kidneys purify your blood with Cystex. Usually the very first dose starts helping your kidneys clean out excess acids and this soon may make you feel like new again. Under the money-back guarantee Cystex must satisfy completely or cost nothing. Get Cystex (siss-tex) today. It costs only 3c a dose at druggists and the guarantee protects you.

"I Won $100 the Day I Got My Rabbit's Foot"

writes F. T. of Pa. "The PRAYER you sent me with my RABBIT'S FOOT has helped me wonderfully. I was nearly crippled. Now I am getting well again," says Mrs. L. C. of Ohio. "I now have steady work," writes Fred C. of Canada.

Letters like these coming from grateful men and women all over the country make me very happy. It may be coincidence, or it may be the psychological effect, but whatever it is, these people believe I have helped them—and I would like to help YOU, too!

No matter what your Hard Luck is, Poor Health, No Job, Unlucky in Numbers, Games, Races, Sweepstakes, etc., in Love, Lonely, Worried, or anything else—you should send this very day for one of my Genuine LUCKY RABBIT'S FEET and the SPECIAL PRAYER for You and Your Loved Ones which I enclose in every order.

Thousands of people swear that the mysterious LUCKY POWER of a real RABBIT'S FOOT brings Good Fortune and Protection from Harm. Almost every living soul on earth has FAITH in the Tremendous, Mighty, Never-Failing POWER OF PRAYER. If you haven't tried the combination of these two Great POWERS, don't delay! People say they may easily Change Your Luck overnight!

So please hurry! Clip this message and mail with 25c (coin) to help cover my expenses. I want to help you as fast as I can. Your Sincere Friend, LADY HOPE, 201 Post Road, Noroton, Conn.

ROOFLESS PLATES
FILLS A LONG FELT WANT
Order by Mail at Money Saving Prices
FREE Sanitary Wrapped Impression Material and FULL INSTRUCTIONS How to Order By Mail!
MULTITUDES OF PLEASED USERS SAY MY PLATES SAVED THEM MANY DOLLARS—IMPROVE THE APPEARANCE—ADD YOU WITH YOUR SPEECH
Just send name and address TODAY. Don't delay.
SEND NO MONEY
60 DAYS' TRIAL
Dr. J. S. LIPPERT
Plate Specialist with 33 years' experience
Pres. of Dr. Jos. S. Lippert Dental Lab. Inc.
Dept. 430-B
24 E. Van Buren St., Chicago, Ill.

PIANO — HAWAIIAN (STEEL) GUITAR
SPANISH GUITAR ... easily learned at home

Become a skilled musician by our simple, short-cut note method. Play songs almost instantly. COST LESS THAN 2c A DAY! Money back guarantee. Write for free details. HAMANN INSTITUTE, 3014 N. 24th Place, Dept. T-2, Milwaukee, Wis.

Action the World Over in Stories That Take You to Every Part of the Globe

IN OUR COMPANION MAGAZINE

THRILLING ADVENTURES

10c AT ALL STANDS

TRAIL CAMP

WINTER'S got us holed up in line camps, bunkhouses, and sod shacks about now. The ground is plumb froze over, the brooks and little creeks are stilled, cased in their sleepers of ice by Jack Frost. The dead grass on the plains, stiff with hoarfrost, cracks like an old man's joints under the tread.

Did it ever occur to you armchair waddies what a cowboy does in winter time? How is a cattle ranch run in the cold weather? Just what functions at this time of the year? Maybe you'd be surprised at how much work goes on, and how tough it is to face zero weather and raw blizzards.

True, there isn't any calving to speak of, no branding, no horse breaking, and there's lots of poker and catalogue reading. But stock has to be cared for all year around. Cattle have to be fed and kept out of the deep coulees and away from accidents and starving wolves. There's gear to be mended, friendships to be patched, and a hundred things to be seen to between sun-up and sundown.

CATTLE FEVER

Intensely interesting, but not enough to hang a fast-moving story on. So, while we'd like to hand you rannies a good old yarn flavored with the icy breath of winter and smarting, stinging ears, steaming breath, and sizzling pork sausage seasoned with bits of red pepper just to give you the feel of a cattle range in winter, we've chosen a more stirring theme in the migration of market herds from Texas northward to Dodge City and Abilene. But next issue's complete book-length

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS *IN*

novel, WINCHESTER WAR, by Oscar J. Friend, is not just a story of the cattle trail. It is a story of the grief and trouble that beset strong men on both sides of the fence before medical science came to their aid and stamped out the danger of cattle fever.

WINCHESTER WAR is a stirring, poignant, heart-wringing, thrilling story of two-fisted men who fought blindly against that which they did not understand, against neighbors they did understand, and against two-legged coyotes who thought they saw an opportunity to cash in on misfortune.

Steve Reese, "Doc" to his friends, forced by the very nature of his environment to be a hard-fighting gunslinger, brings a different kind of law to the Frontier—the law of cooperation between men. With the help of his two intrepid aides, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, he brings peace to the hardy ranchers and a solution of their problems. You will remember WINCHESTER WAR a long time.

THANKS TO YOU ALL

We'd like to take a moment and a paragraph here to thank you tophands for your warm reception of RANGE RIDERS. The numerous letters we've received have been as cheerful as the sunshine through the leaves of the cottonwoods in the river bottom country on a fall day. It's weather and encouragement like this that makes a fellow work his fool self into a lather of sweat. Before you know it, we'll be having a regular letter department in RANGE RIDERS where you longhorns can swap some of your tall tales.

We have several acknowledgments to make for suggestions received, and as soon as we can begin incorporating slight changes, we shall do so. In the meantime, partners, keep reading the brand and help us nurse this particular calf into a husky yearling.

Yours until the Chinooks blow and bring us out for the spring round-up next issue.—YOUR EDITOR.

GUARANTEED TIRES!
GOODYEAR·GOODRICH
FIRESTONE·U.S. and
Other Standard Makes

FREE! LANTERN With Every 2 Tires ordered

Complete with batteries and newest type reflector bulb. Ready for instant use. Strong, steady light. Useful everywhere. Order now.

$2.15 29×4.40-21

World's Lowest TIRE PRICES

Tire users by the thousands all over the U.S.A. vouch for the Long Hard Service of our Standard Brand tires reconditioned with high grade materials and latest methods by our tire experts. Our 21 years experience makes it possible to offer tires at lowest prices, with legal agreement to replace at ½ price any tire that fails to give 12 Mos. Service.

EVERY TIRE GUARANTEED!

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$1.05
29x4.50-20	2.35	1.05
30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15
28x4.75-19	2.45	1.25
29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.65	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.65	1.25
5.25-17	2.50	1.35
29x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	2.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	2.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-16	2.75	1.40

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	$0.95
31x4	2.95	1.25
32x4	2.95	1.25
33x4	2.95	1.25
34x4	3.25	1.35
32x4½	3.35	1.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
34x4½	3.45	1.45
30x5	3.65	1.65
32x5	3.75	1.75
33x5	3.95	1.75

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES (High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95
33x5	3.95	1.75
34x5	4.25	2.25
32x6	7.95	2.95
36x6	9.95	4.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
34x7	$10.95	$4.65
38x7	10.95	4.65
36x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
6.50-20	4.45	1.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.50-20	$6.95	$2.75
8.25-20	8.95	4.95
9.00-20	10.95	5.65
9.75-20	13.95	5.45

ALL OTHER SIZES — DEALERS WANTED

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. ($3.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW — GUARANTEED

PERRY-FIELD TIRE & RUBBER CO.
2328-30 S. Michigan Av., Dept. TF-16, Chicago, Ill.

STOP THAT ITCH WITH D.D.D. Prescription

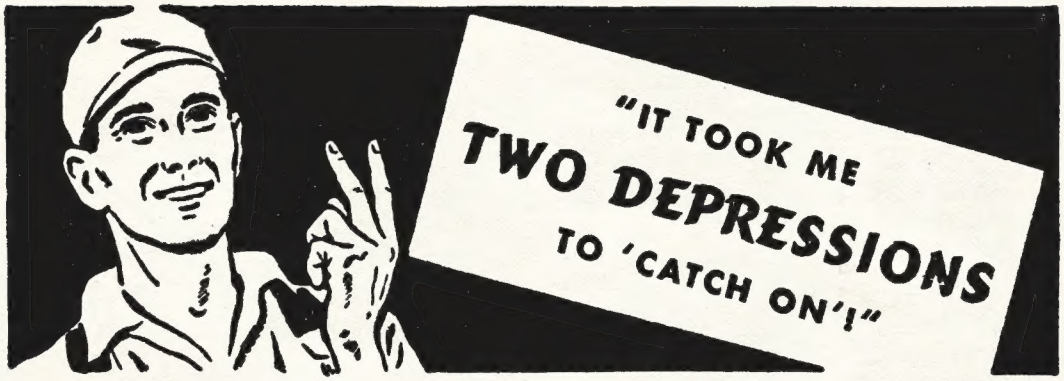
HERE'S QUICK RELIEF
For quick relief from itching of eczema, rashes, pimples, athlete's foot, and other externally caused skin eruptions, use cooling, antiseptic, liquid D. D. D. PRESCRIPTION. Greaseless, stainless, dries fast. Stops the most intense itching in a hurry. A 35c trial bottle, at all drug stores, proves it—or your money back. Don't suffer longer.

ASTHMA
TREATMENT mailed on Free Trial. If satisfied send $1; if not, it's Free. Write me for your treatment today.
W. K. STERLINE, 830 Ohio Ave., Sidney, Ohio

Original POEMS—SONGS WANTED FOR PUBLICATION
WESTMORE MUSIC CORP.
Dept. 44F, Portland, Ore.

See WOODSTOCK TYPEWRITERS

EVERY ISSUE OF COLLEGE HUMOR 15c EVERYWHERE



"Sure, I was 'sitting pretty' in 1928. Good job, swell girl, no worries. Then—*bang!* — it's '29 and I'm one of the first to be fired! Those were a couple of tough years, I'm telling you. Couldn't find work, and I'd been planning to get married!

"When things picked up, I was back at work — coasting along at the same pay on the same job. I got married. Thought some about the future — but didn't *do* anything about it.

"Then 'recession' came, and I was out again! But I noticed something this time. I noticed that the *trained* men, the boys who knew more than A-B-C about their jobs, weren't 'let out' right off the bat! In fact, the four fellows I knew who had been taking I. C. S. Courses kept their jobs right through the slump!

"Then I 'caught on'! I'm back at work again — and, believe you me, I'm going to stay here! The day I was rehired, *I enrolled with the I. C. S.!* They tell me there are 100,000 men enrolled with those Schools right now. (Fact is, I learned recently that my boss is an old I. C. S. graduate.) And if another business slump comes along, I'll be prepared to weather it! Because I know that the *trained* man is the *only* man equipped to 'ride out' stormy business seas!"

• • •

Do employers recognize the value of I. C. S. training? *Nearly 3000 leading industrial organizations have employee-training agreements with the International Correspondence Schools.* Mail the coupon — and mail it *today!*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

BOX 3970-N, SCRANTON, PENNA.

★ Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X: ★

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

☐ Architect
☐ Architectural Draftsman
☐ Building Estimating
☐ Contractor and Builder
☐ Structural Draftsman
☐ Structural Engineer
☐ Management of Inventions
☐ Electrical Engineer
☐ Electric Lighting
☐ Welding, Electric and Gas
☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
☐ Sheet Metal Worker
☐ Boilermaker
☐ Telegraph Engineer
☐ Telephone Work ☐ Radio
☐ Mechanical Engineering
☐ Mechanical Draftsman
☐ Machinist ☐ Toolmaker
☐ Patternmaker
☐ Diesel Engines
☐ Aviation Engines
☐ Auto Technician
☐ Auto Electrical Technician
☐ Commercial Refrigeration
☐ Plumbing ☐ Steam Fitting
☐ Heating ☐ Ventilation
☐ Air Conditioning and Cooling
☐ Steam Engineer
☐ Steam Electric Engineer
☐ Marine Engineer
☐ R. R. Locomotives
☐ R. R. Section Foreman
☐ Air Brakes ☐ R. R. Signalmen
☐ Highway Engineering
☐ Civil Engineering
☐ Surveying and Mapping
☐ Bridge Engineer
☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
☐ Chemistry ☐ Pharmacy
☐ Coal Mining
☐ Mine Foreman ☐ Fire Bosses
☐ Navigation
☐ Cotton Manufacturing
☐ Woolen Manufacturing
☐ Agriculture
☐ Fruit Growing
☐ Poultry Farming

BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES

☐ Business Management
☐ Industrial Management
☐ Traffic Management
☐ Accountancy
☐ Cost Accountant
☐ C. P. Accountant
☐ Bookkeeping
☐ Secretarial Work
☐ Spanish
☐ French
☐ Salesmanship
☐ Advertising
☐ Service Station Salesmanship
☐ First Year College Subjects
☐ Business Correspondence
☐ Stenography and Typing
☐ Civil Service ☐ Mail Carrier
☐ Railway Mail Clerk
☐ Grade School Subjects
☐ High School Subjects
☐ College Preparatory
☐ Illustrating
☐ Cartooning
☐ Lettering Show Cards ☐ Signs

DOMESTIC SCIENCE COURSES

☐ Home Dressmaking ☐ Advanced Dressmaking
☐ Professional Dressmaking and Designing
☐ Foods and Cookery
☐ Tea Room and Cafeteria Management, Catering

Name.....*Age*.....*Address*.....

City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....

If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada
If you reside in England, send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England

"One Week from To-night You'll See PROOF that I can make You a New Man!"

NOTE—No other man in the world has ever DARED make such an offer!

This Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away

This valuable cup stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base. I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

I GIVE MORE than "promises." I give PROOF! If you're sick and tired of half-baked ideas—if you really **want** a build like mine—then **one week**, 7 DAYS, is all I need to **prove** I can give it to you!

You've **got** a body, man. Why not make it a real handsome **man's** body! There's NO good reason why you shouldn't have rippling cords of mighty muscle across your neck and shoulders. No reason at all why your chest shouldn't be strapping, big and husky, like mine—your arms and legs powerful—your wind lasting—your vigor **100%**!

I used to be a sickly, half-pint runt weighing only 97 lbs. a "laughing stock" wherever I went. No fun. No friends. Right there I almost "fell" for some of these freak spring or weight contraptions to make me "strong." But THEN—by the luckiest break of my life—I discovered **Dynamic Tension.**

Apparatus is OUT!

Look at me now. You don't see any skinny, flabby, no-account bag of bones **here,** do you? This is what my remarkable secret has done for **my** body. Twice—against all comers—I have won the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." No wonder I've got no use for tricky weights, pulleys or machines that may strain your heart or other vital organs. I've found the **natural** way to build the husky, solid, fighting muscles that Nature **means** for you to **have**! And I've shown thousands of other fellows, many of them probably much worse off than you, how to develop themselves into champions MY way!

I'll give you clean-cut health **inside,** too—show you exactly how to get rid of constipation, poor digestion, bad breath, pimples and other weaknesses that are robbing you of the good times and things in life that can be yours.

Now make me PROVE I can do it. Let me send **you** the FREE Book that opens the door to **he-man living.** Just tell me where to send it. Use the coupon. There's no obligation. But—be MAN enough to send the coupon NOW!

Send for FREE BOOK

My big book, "Everlasting Health and Strength"—packed with actual photographs and vital facts every fellow must know to face life—tells the whole remarkable story of **Dynamic Tension.** Privately printed for me, it's FREE if you act AT ONCE. Are you ready to learn my secret?—ready to learn how I can give YOU the kind of body that will make you a masterful **leader?** Then tell me where to send your copy of my book. Fill in the coupon below, and mail TODAY to me personally. Address: **CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77B, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.**

Mail Coupon for FREE BOOK

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 77B,
115 East 23rd Street,
New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **Dynamic Tension** will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength," and full details of your 7-DAY trial offer.

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly.)

Address.....

City.....

State.....

NEW FROM KALAMAZOO !

NEW Coal and Wood Ranges—NEW Gas Stoves
NEW Combination Gas, Coal and Wood Ranges
NEW Combination Electric, Coal and Wood Range
NEW Oil Heaters—NEW Coal and Wood Heaters
NEW Furnaces—FREE Furnace Plans

ALL ON EASY MONTHLY PAYMENTS

NEW FACTORY PRICES!

New Low Priced Coal and Wood Heaters

FREE Sensational NEW Stove Catalog! NEW FACTORY PRICES! NEW designs. NEW ideas. NEW features. Nearly 300 illustrations. *Handsome NEW color photographs of modern kitchens.* As newsy and colorful as a magazine. Just off the press—ready for you. *Mail coupon.*

Nearly 200 Styles, Sizes and Colors

You'll see nearly 200 styles, sizes and colors—174 Ranges, in all White, Tan and Ivory, Green and Ivory, Black and White, Gray and White, 14 different Heaters, 22 Furnaces. Stoves approved by Good Housekeeping Institute. Coal and Wood Ranges; Gas Stoves; Combination Gas, Coal and Wood Ranges; Combination Electric, Coal and Wood Ranges; Oil Ranges; Coal and Wood Heaters; Oil Heaters; Water Heaters; Washing Machines; Vacuum Cleaners; Furnaces. FREE furnace plans. *A bookful of bargains—more than you'll find in 20 big stores.*

All our Gas Stoves burn Bottled Gas, Manufactured or Natural Gas

Use Your Credit—Terms as Little as 18¢ a Day

You'll marvel at the *easy terms—as little as 18c a day for some stoves.* Year to pay. *3 years to pay for furnaces.*

24 Hour Shipments—Factory Guarantee

You'll be astounded at the new rapid Factory-to-You service (24 hour shipments). Order on 30 days trial. Satisfaction or money-back guarantee. You don't risk a cent.

Oven that "Floats in Flame"

Mail coupon! See the oven that "Floats in Flame." Read letters from national and state baking champions. See other exclusive Kalamazoo stove features in this marvelous NEW FREE CATALOG. Send for it today.

"A Kalamazoo Direct to You"
Trade Mark Registered

Mail Coupon Today for

NEW FREE CATALOG

1,300,000 Users—39 Years in Business

Over 1,300,000 Satisfied Users praise Kalamazoo Quality. This is the 39th year of "A Kalamazoo Direct to You." Save at the FACTORY PRICE. Send for this FREE Catalog today. Mail coupon!

KALAMAZOO STOVE & FURNACE CO., Manufacturers
493 Rochester Avenue, Kalamazoo, Michigan
Warehouses: Utica, N. Y.; Reading, Penn.; Youngstown, Ohio; Springfield, Mass.

See this New Combination Electric, Coal and Wood Range

Circulating Coal and Wood Heaters

New Type Warm Air Furnaces

Kalamazoo Stove & Furnace Company
493 Rochester Avenue, Kalamazoo, Mich.

Dear Sirs: Send FREE FACTORY CATALOG.
Check articles in which you are interested:

☐ Combination Gas, Coal and Wood Ranges ☐ Gas Ranges
☐ Coal and Wood Ranges ☐ Coal and Wood Heaters
☐ Combination Electric and Coal-Wood Ranges ☐ Oil Ranges
☐ Oil Heaters ☐ Furnaces

Name.....
(Print name plainly)

Address.....

City..... *State*.....